

CutBank

Volume 1
Issue 33 *CutBank* 33

Article 1

Spring 1990

CutBank 33

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CutBank



CutBank 33

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CutBank is indexed in *The Access to Little Magazines*, and is available on microfiche from Gaylord Bros., Inc., P.O. Box 61, Syracuse, NY 13210. It is also listed in *The Index to Periodical Verse*.

Subscriptions to CutBank are \$12/year. All correspondence should be sent to *CutBank*, c/o Department of English, University of Montana, Missoula, Montana 59812. *CutBank* announces its annual competition for the best story and best poem published each year in *CutBank*. Send submissions to "The Editors" at the above address.

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CutBank 33

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Steve Saroff

Ruin

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CutBank would like to thank the Associated Students of Montana for continued financial support.

We also extend our gratitude to our supporters in the private sector.

Donors

Jim Scott for The Fields

Jack Waller

With special thanks to Bruce Weide for the donation of an Osborne 1 computer which has made our work much easier.

Typing and laser printing were done by Word Processing Services, University of Montana.

Page printing was done by Garden City Printing.

Cover, art, and photo printing and binding were done by Artcraft of Missoula.

Digging a Garden

I rake back, twice, this new place,
once to clear leaves--the fan-teeth
tinging ancient songs, one note for each
catch along this patch
of earth's holy music-roll.
Then the law and order jags of a straight rake
straining to uproot grass so crabby it would argue
even about the sureness of death, holding on
as if possession were enough,
as if roots and prior claim
could hold sway.

A light mist settles as I break earth,
a benediction cooling my throbbing face,
softening the soil. I rise, a dream
in a stranger's sleep, away from the hovering
magnolia, out of the radius of pinestraw
to this corner, exposed.

Chard, onion, squash, beans,
staked and braided plum tomatoes.
This is one version of the future. For now,

my right arm, muscles awake and complaining,
lift rounds of soil up, out, and over
row after row, turning what has seen light
back to face the underearth, turning up
this white chrysalis, some creature inside
learning within its confines how to fly.

Under the overhang of old shrub
strawberry runners deepen to red,
stemming each span of the unknown
with three possibilities. Two paces
distant, a pearl gray mockingbird
trimmed with black wingbands
keeps pace--fearless, taking in
translucent earthworms amazed

to find themselves suddenly
turning up
in this world.

Turned up or turned out
some burrow back to the familiar.
Others, consumed, take flight.

Peggy Shumaker

Why Ira Pratt Cocked His Head Like That

Twelve hours a day, six days a week.
Stamping out barrel staves, cattle tanks,
strong boxes, silo sheeting. At first his brain
swelled, slamming all night the same
steel chants, his bones jamming, misaligned.
They bought real glass for the windows.

A dropped sheet 4 x 8 sliced off two toes.
The strawboss didn't dock him.
Ira walked tighter, repaired his own shoe.
God preserve us from what we get used to.
They paid the improvement on the homeplace.

The knocking in his head slacked off, and he slept.
*Couldn't startle him if you drove a buckboard
through the bed.* He liked Amy saying that.
The day after Easter, he rose early,
checked the nest. Watched newly-hatched robins
open their beaks. Then his hands began to sweat.

Peggy Shumaker

Babyman

At The Pocket Inn on Detroit's North Side, the crowd thins out after midnight. Carroll Spark carries a five month old baby girl, his unnamed daughter, across the icy parking lot. She's wrapped in a little pink parka he scored at the GoodWill. The girl sleeps, a bottled nestled in the parka next to her. But if she wakes up, so much the better. The game is better if the baby cries.

It's smoky inside The Pocket. Carroll edges up to the bar, stands next to a platinum blonde in black jeans and high-heel boots. He orders a Screwdriver. When Carroll sets the baby on the counter, the blonde turns around. Her breasts are too small.

He eyes two gals across the room. A brunette with a big nose and chest and a pretty redhead with hoop earrings. He walks around the bar as if he's looking intently for someone, holding the baby in front of him like a shield or a badge.

Ignoring the women, he stations himself close enough for them not to be able to ignore him. He reaches into the parka, pinches the baby's bottom. Several people look over when she cries.

Carroll fidgets as if trying to calm the baby. Inside the parka he pinches her again.

It's the brunette who bites first. Carroll plays the bars like a fisherman working a stream.

"What a little sweetheart," she says. "What's the matter with you, honey?"

As the brunette reaches out, Carroll hands her the baby, as if that's what they both had intended. He catches the woman's eye and shows her a bland, even smile. Not even a hint of a threat.

Carroll knows his features are even; his brown hair full and fine. Even the deep lines across his forehead are smooth and symmetrical. But he worries that his ears and his lips are too big and too red.

The baby stops crying. The woman smiles. Carroll grins back, as if this sudden three-way happiness is a little trophy he's earned. Something to take home and keep.

The redhead goes home alone. Carroll and Joleen leave The Pocket in Carroll's van. Tonight he calls the baby Dianne.

Carroll stops at the NiteOwl-Package-Drive-Thru for a pint of vodka, a quart of orange juice, and a quart of whole milk. He gets on the Morton Expressway even though it's just for a mile. He likes to get above the city and see the rooftops and lights spread out in the distance. In the van, on the road, the city can play tricks with your mind. Get close enough, down on the streets, it looks like a huge, silent wrestling match, all grimaces and tears.

Back way off, up on the freeway, it's like a cold stone tableau, like one of those friezes on the old buildings downtown, all finished up and dignified. He exits on Eisenbach and drives to the double garage he rents off the alley behind Gannal Street. He drives down the alley for the last six blocks, easing the van over rough spots, steering around open dumpsters and abandoned cars.

Joleen doesn't seem to notice the freeway or the alley. She stares at the baby on her lap and talks about her job--factory work at Campbells, the Banquet division. She runs a machine that plops peas and potatoes into tray from 3 to 11, five days a week. She plays with the baby, saying "peas and potatoes, peas and potatoes," as she touches the little face. Carroll can already tell she's never had a kid. But wanted to.

The way Carroll tells it to Joleen, the baby's mother is a real scumbag. He's trying to get her back, he says, but she's strung out, and he only sees her by luck in the bars. He's waiting for her to come to her senses, come back to him and baby Dianne. It's almost beautiful what a crock of shit most people are dying to believe. Almost beautiful.

In the garage, Carroll opens all the van's doors. He puts Eddie Money's first album in the van's cassette player, his only sound system. The room smells stale, like something dirty's been burning. Carroll twists open the round, orange air freshener stuck on the refrigerator door. Joleen sits on the couch against the far wall while Carroll mixes Screwdrivers for both of them.

"Healthiest drink there is. Plenty of C. And no beer breath. Even baby Dianne likes em." He laughs like he's teasing. A sip or two really does quiet the kid down at night though.

"You're terrible. And she's such a cutie pie." Joleen juggles her Screwdriver in an oversize plastic Dixie cup while she holds the baby's bottle. "You're raising her all by yourself? Here?"

She looks around the garage. A big oil-drum wood stove stands in one corner with concrete blocks stacked up all around it that can hold the heat a long time. Carroll burns garbage from up and down the alley. He could buy firewood--he's got a decent job--but he likes to scavenge. He's a security guard downtown, same place for years. Routine's good for a person. And Carroll lives cheap. Some of his money he sends to southern California where his first child lives with his first and last ex-wife. The kid's in high school now. Damn expensive--that age--that place. Cars, clothes, CD's, drugs. Not like when they're babies. Milk and diapers are all they really need, long as they're healthy. The garage is well-insulated, not too cold in winter, not too hot in summer.

"I don't know what else to do. I'm so in debt from the drug clinic I sent her mama to." He points at the baby, still in Joleen's

arms. "They want a small fortune for Treatment. And she was in there all day every day for 30 days. It's like a goddamn taxi meter clicking, that Treatment is. I went to 12-step meetings with her till I saw those 12 steps in my dreams. I really felt we had it licked. Now look at me." Carroll waves an open palm slowly around the room.

There's a carpet on the floor on the half of the garage where the van doesn't park. It's rolled across the floor and then right up the wall behind them and nailed down near the ceiling. In one corner, there's a crib. Above it hangs a delicate mobile, little pastel balls so light they move when someone walks by the crib. Carroll conjures a tear. Joleen kisses it.

Carroll pulls away from Joleen and rolls over in the bed. He starts to move toward the crib. Joleen hugs him to her.

"Hope I didn't wake Dianne up with my hollering," she says with a new tone of intimacy to her voice. "Haven't you finished yet? Is there something wrong?"

"No, nothing wrong, baby, just something missing. You want to satisfy me, don't you?" He nuzzles his head between her breasts. The right one seems slightly smaller.

"Sure, Carroll, I'm just tired. You gotta give a gal some breathin' room. That's all. You need some special TLC from Joleen?"

"I need the baby." He moves to the crib in the half-dark room. "Feed us honey," he says as he gets back in bed, "Feed us both." The baby's mouth slides around her breast.

"I don't have what she needs," she starts to pull away from them, "really, Carroll, I don't."

"It don't matter," he mutters as he kisses at her other breast, "It don't matter. You both got what I need, you both got what the babyman needs."

Eddie Money begins Side 2 for the third time. Carroll watches the baby's lips work on Joleen like a fish mouth, feeding, trembling, at the bottom of a pool of clear water. He hopes Joleen doesn't say anything, doesn't wreck it with words, doesn't argue, or laugh. All of his own words slide out of his head until it's just him, him and the baby, alone together with this woman.

Then he hears Joleen. She does what most people would call crying, what Carroll would call crying at any other time and place. She does it quietly, holds two heads close to her, opens her legs again.

People do things. Things you'd never expect. That's what makes it interesting. Like a torture chamber. Like a symphony orchestra.

Carroll can get a woman pregnant, as long as certain conditions are met. Conditions like in the garage, the first night with Joleen, with the baby. And that's what he does. Gets her pregnant. Women are like jackpots, he figures. You play em. There's skill and there's luck.

Skill was getting her home, getting her bedded. Luck was getting her pregnant. More luck was that she's pro-life. One hundred per cent. Pregnant and pro-life. Bingo.

Skill will be getting the baby.

"Ever since I told you I'm PG you been actin' different to me," says Joleen. "I never shoulda gotten mixed up with you and Dianne. If I hadn't been dog-tired that night and seen that sweet kid--you're fucking cuckoo. They'll take that kid away from you, Carroll. They will. Less you marry me." She says it like she's trying to be mean and sweet at the same time, like she's trying to match the way she thinks Carroll is.

Carroll laughs. What she doesn't know. He's traded babies since '81. Leon, a friend on the city police, has connections. Bought and sold and traded. Out of downtown, into the suburbs. Out of the suburbs, over to the coast. Leon likes it, Carroll likes it, people uptown like it, people on the coast like it. Even the babies like it. Dianne, this little girl, wasn't a trade though. But she could be. She sure could be.

"The day Reagan was shot," Carroll says.

"What the hell you talking about. I'm serious, damn you."

"So am I. That was the first one I bought. My grubstake. Little boy. Blue-eyed."

"I don't want to hear this crap. Where's Dianne's mother?"

"It ain't no Dianne, and there ain't no mother. Except maybe you." In spite of himself, he smirks at her like a boy who's played a clever trick. "Maybe I just called her that cause you said you had a niece named Dianne that night down at The Pocket, remember?"

"Carroll, listen to me, damnit. Don't tease me. I'm pregnant, grade-A pregnant, no ifs, ands, or buts--I been to the Clinic. We could make out together--I just know we could. Between the both of us, we got two jobs and a van. And Dianne."

Carroll has started polishing the leather pistol holster he wears at work. He whistles low. Two Tickets to Paradise. Eddie Money.

"I said listen, you mother, I loved you and that little kid just how you wanted even if it is damn near sick the way you--the way you do things."

Carroll points the empty holster at her. His ears are bright red. He licks his lips.

"Please don't say sick, Joleen."

"Look, it's common sense. I can't raise no kid on my pay. Half my check'd go for day care. And you're gonna need help with Dianne before long."

Carroll puts his fat finger through the holster hole. Rubs it back and forth.

"Truth is," he says, pointing at her belly, "truth is, you're the one who's sick."

Watching a woman get desperate is its very own brand of fun. Like the old flicks with the villain who always has a railroad track handy and knows all the train schedules by heart. As long as you know you'll be there to untie the ropes before the train chugs through. To Carroll the trick is to be both the villain and the hero. Be your own damn movie. Hire you own actors.

Like Joleen.

She's over six months into it when baby Dianne disappears.

When she finds out, she throws a fit.

Dianne was getting too big to keep anyway, and Leon called in an IOU from a trade last year. That's what friends are for--especially downtown. Carroll knows in advance Joleen will freak. But without the baby, it means no real sex anyway. Carroll can go a long time between drinks of water. There'll always be another woman, as long as there's another baby. And vice versa. The game goes on and on.

At midnight he slips Dianne through the window of Leon's cruiser along with a little bag he's packed with some diapers and milk. Leon sets her carefully down on the passenger seat next to an upright double-barreled shotgun. He gives Carroll a thumbs-up and disappears down the alley.

Carroll waits till he's done missing baby Dianne himself before he sees Joleen again. Almost a month. Don't ever think Carroll don't care about the babies, too. He cares in the way they all just have to come and go, in the way there's so many of em and they're all so much alike. Almost a month. That's what makes him the babyman, deep down.

"Her mama took her back," Carroll says when Joleen asks about Dianne. "She moved to New York, they got better clinics there, she's gonna be a drug counselor while she keeps up with her own treatment. The drowning saving the drowning. That's the way things are, Joleen. The blind find the blind. Like you and me, honey, like you and me." He reaches toward her swollen belly. "Let me feel it kick again."

"Don't touch me or it. You told me so many stories I can't tell what to believe anymore. All I know is I can't stand up all

day in that line much longer."

Carroll plays advocate for the devil.

"Is it too late for an operation, Joleen? I know you said you don't approve and all."

"It was too late one minute after you gave me this thing. I don't want it and you don't want it, but I sure as hell ain't gonna kill it. God moves in mysterious ways, Carroll."

"Damn if He don't. I gotta say I admire you there, Joleen, truly I do. Jesus, your breasts are gorgeous."

It takes him almost an hour to calm her down enough to touch one.

They lie in bed. He rubs her feet where they're sore.

"Honey Joleen, my baby. I didn't know this would happen. You working so hard every day. Damn that factory--no maternity leave until after three years. What a bitch."

He watches her. He waits until her face relaxes.

"We just gotta make a plan, baby. I'm gonna say it slow one time so you know I ain't kidding. I'm not gonna marry you sweetheart."

Joleen listens to the truth and the lies, all mixed up. Her eyes blur. Carroll sees she's learning. There's no good way to sort it out. You believe everything and get your heart broke time and again, or you believe nothing and your heart gets numb and sandy like a foot that's gone asleep. Carroll's proud of all he's figured for himself.

"I'm not marrying nobody, not ever again after the first time. I got a boy in high school I ain't seen for five years. Carroll Jr."

Carroll traces a finger around the hollows of his ear lobe. He can't remember if he's ever told Joleen about Carroll Jr.

"So that's that. But I respect that you got to be true to your feelings and have this baby, that's all there is to it. But then you get to start over." He pauses to let those words sink in.

"I'm past startin' over. I'm here in my niche. You know about niches?"

He waits for her to look in his eyes. "This city's got a million niches, and I'm in mine for the long haul. You just gotta find a niche for yourself. You got plenty of chances left. Look, here's what we'll do. You take leave without pay, and I pay the bills for the next month, including the hospital. And then we go our own separate ways, simple as that, two people, two ways. OK?"

Joleen is doing it again, what she's learned so well at Carroll's place, that unnamed kind of crying. She'd have learned it somewhere anyway, Carroll figures. Just a way of being voiceless in the dark, a way of praying and cursing all at once, a way of making do with it.

"And the kid? What about the kid, Carroll."

"Baby'll be OK. I promise. I'll take the baby."

Carroll stays in the slow lane on the Expressway. The van's out of alignment--it pulls off to the right. He thinks about Joleen. She's in labor. He dropped her off at St. Luke's this afternoon. This is the worst part of the game even though it's the best part, the time when all the women become one woman. One pregnant woman whose face he can't quite see.

Joleen was on the verge of screaming in the van, sweat on her forehead as thick as honey. A baby's on the way for sure. Carroll wonders where it will end up. Maybe in a plush living room in a house by the lakes, learning to walk on carpet as deep and thick as pelt. Two parents hovering around, loving it even more than usual because they had to buy it. That's real love.

He checks the gas gauge when he realizes he's on his third loop around the city. The pavement ahead of him is a gray movie where Carroll watches the past surface and dissolve, and as it unfolds ahead of the van he feels the endless circle of his game closing in on him. People are starting to switch their headlights on.

On his way home Carroll drives by St. Luke's again. He remembers how mad his wife had been in West Covina when Carroll Jr. was coming and he'd taken off for two weeks.

He double-parks in the hospital lot. He counts by heart the floors--one, two, three, four, five--fifth floor maternity. Room after room filled with women and babies, women with babies inside them, babies on top of them, girl babies who will have babies inside of them someday--Carroll thinks of those nesting egg toys that you just keep taking apart, one inside the other, each tinier than the one before.

And boy babies too--boys like Carroll Jr. and Carroll's little brother--the first baby he'd ever seen. When Carroll's father had brought him home from the hospital, the tiny red head poking out from the blanket, all wrinkled and indistinct, Carroll had thought it was a joke, as if somebody'd squeezed out the simplest features of a face in one of his dad's huge fists.

Somebody honks at Carroll, and he looks away from the fifth floor windows. He puts the van in gear and says a private so long to Joleen, although he knows he'll see her at least one more time. One more time to get the baby.

On his police-band CB, he hears his friend Leon turn in a robbery call at a pharmacy a few blocks away. Carroll stops in his alley and collects some cardboard boxes out of a dumpster. Cardboard burns really hot.

Carroll goes to the passenger side of the van and lifts the baby boy he calls Joey out. It's a muggy summer night on the South Side. He gets a bottle of formula from the glove compartment and heads into Marcie's, a small tavern near the Mid-town Glover Plant. His son cries all the time. It gets on Carroll's nerves.

He sets his face to look like a brand-new father--worried, distraught. What he doesn't know is that the expressions he tries for, ones he's gotten mostly off TV shows, aren't ever quite the ones he gets. What shows now is a boyish kind of fear, a desperate look, mostly around his pale eyes.

The bar's pretty empty. He sits in a corner and sips a Screwdriver beneath a neon electric guitar that says BUD. He gives Joey a bottle and waits for the swing-shift traffic.

A woman with no purse walks in and Carroll hears her ask the bartender if that little prick, Mickey, has been in. The bartender says no and gives her a can of seven-up before she asks. She's tall with thin, long legs and arms and neck, fine-boned, but with a bust like in the old days. She's got a light mustache or some sweat on her upper lip, but she looks like she doesn't care which or who wonders.

She looks over at Carroll and his kid in the corner. Joey starts to fuss. As Carroll dabs at his face and picks him up, the woman comes over to them. It's sweat.

Her breasts are full and large beneath her cotton dress. Carroll shakes the hand she pokes in his face as she takes the baby. Her name is Dora Mattsen. Everybody just calls her Matty. Carroll tells her his name.

"Poor little kid, so hungry." Matty sniffs the bottle Carroll's been using and wrinkles her nose.

"You trying to kill the kid? Forget this sour stuff." She sets the plastic bottle on the table. "We know what this little fella needs, don't we." She's baring a swollen, golden nipple and pulling Joey down to it. "Same as all of em need, young or old, eh?" She winks at Carroll.

When they leave, Matty carries Joey, still attached to her, and Carroll follows.

Matty directs Carroll to her place, a run-down fourplex on McNain that she manages in return for half her rent. They park in the driveway between two bikes and an oversize skateboard as big as a small sled. As they go in, Carroll sees a hand-lettered sign in the window. Block Home.

"What's the block home business, Matty?" Carroll makes small talk. He can't get an angle on how to sweet-talk her.

"What? Oh, kids can come in here. I'm always at home in

the daytime--I run a little day care--the Johnson twins upstairs in #4 and a couple of others. I got a sign up over at the Grimebuster Laundry. You'd be surprised--I have to turn people away."

"Yeah, I know, before Joey's mother ran out on us, she was having trouble even finding babysitters." He tries to look as if he's not really wanting sympathy.

"See if you can get a good picture." Matty says as she hands Carroll the remote control for the TV. You may have to fiddle with it. Are you any good with your hands?" She disappears down the hallway with Joey.

Carroll looks at the TV. The VHF is broken off, and a piece of curtain hanger is wired onto the rabbit ears. He goes to look for Matty. He didn't come here to play fix-it man.

He sneaks up behind her in the dark bedroom. He plans to show her just how good he is with his hands--that line was a come-on if he ever heard one. Just as he gets to her, she turns around, naked to the waist. Joey's on the bed behind her. She puts her arms around Carroll and kisses him and then pulls away and returns to Joey all in one continuous motion, all without a word. He watches her half-naked silhouette as she changes the baby's diaper and begins to nurse. But when Carroll shows her his hard-on, Matty tell him what he can do with it--for all she cares, she says--head for the bathroom.

Matty makes it sound simple. She says she loves babies, loves kids, but doesn't have much use anymore for men--and even less for sex. She's got four kids already. Her youngest, Dean, is 14 months. She lets Carroll watch her nurse Joey and Dean as much as he wants, but whenever he asks for more, she just says "tough" to him. She says it a lot, that word. "Tough."

"You got a thing about tough, don't you, Matty." Carroll tries to bait her. "How'd you get these kids in the first place? Musta not been so tough somewhere along the line. Somebody opened the oven door sometime, didn't they?"

"How I got 'em is my business, Carroll. I don't ask you about Joey. What's the use of us telling each other a pack of lies. Just tell me that. It ain't questions that make this world go round."

The van is perfect for what Matty calls "outings." Matty drives it like a bus while Carroll reads city maps and the little brochures about local attractions that Matty's collected from the Detroit Tourist Bureau. She likes to take her family all over town, from the downtown to the suburbs. And back. Every weekend.

She tells Carroll you don't have to go a long way to have a good time--she says they could go someplace different every weekend of their lives and never get outside the Greater Detroit

Area. When he tells her where he's from, California, she says she's never gone west of Iowa City, Iowa. And doesn't really care to.

Carroll keeps the garage and his job and his van, but his party money, his game money and baby money, all goes to Matty and the kids. He rolls up the carpet and tacks it down in Matty's TV room so the kids will be warmer. Mostly Carroll uses the garage to work on the van. He puts new brake shoes on and turns the drums. He puts a new clutch in. Matty rides the clutch real bad.

But she's a great cook and smart as a whip. That's what it really boils down to, smart. The way she don't even wait for Carroll to tell her a lie, the way she marches right on around the parts of life Carroll struggles to explain away--she's smarter than Carroll. And he's just smart enough to figure that out. They say grace before every meal.

"You're always telling me about your friends on the force," Matty says. "So go for it. God knows the City pays better than your rinky-dink company."

"Yeah, I've got just enough friends on the force to know better. Money's not everything. I like my job. I'm used to it."

"So you can get used to being a policeman. You can get used to anything, give it enough time. Here, I'll call for you." She dials the number in the City's newspaper ad for recruits and makes Carroll an appointment for next week.

Carroll slams down his pop and it fizzes over on the end table. "I'm too old anyway. I'll just be wasting my time."

Matty wipes up his spill and slides a cardboard coaster under it as she talks. "Too old," she repeats his words, "what's with you and too old? You're as old as you think you are." She flashes him a wide smile.

"Look here," she says, "there's ways and there's ways. You're not the only one with friends. You think there's nobody in this town don't owe me a favor or two?"

"Maybe everybody owes you a favor, Matty, but maybe not me, maybe it's time for me to go my own separate way here. You're getting too far into my shit, way too far." He rises from the vinyl recliner. It squeaks as it folds up behind him.

Matty pushes Carroll back into his chair with the tips of her long, fine, fingers, as if her movement were the shadow of a real gesture, as if he weighed nothing, as if she could not imagine resistance from him. "Stay put, you're not gonna go anywhere, Carroll. I've got your number. I got it the first night I met you."

She heads down the hall to the bedroom. "They'll be proud," she says, "a policeman right in the house. It'll be safer for everybody."

She comes out with the babies, Joey and Dean. She calls the other kids out of the TV room.

Carroll sits still as they assemble around him like silent little animals, their unflinching eyes on him, gazes as warm as sunlight, small hands all over his knees. Matty watches him like he's already safe behind bars. She gives him Joey to hold as she nurses Dean.

"Hold Joey while I feed baby Dean."

"Goddamn, his name ain't even Joey. That's just what I call him because his mother's name was Joleen. None of this is me, this ain't my niche. It's not my niche here at all."

"So we'll make it your niche. Hell, how does anybody get a name? How'd you get yours--was your mother's name Carol? Was it?"

Carroll winces. His ears go red.

"See, it goes right on, it might as well be here. I'll take care of you and your baby and you take care of us. We'll keep calling him Joey--we'll keep calling you Carroll. There's nothing wrong with those names, nothing at all."

Carroll wonders what the night patrol shift will be like. He wonders if he could get Leon as a partner somehow. It'd be just like one of those old TV shows. He closes his eyes as he hears the baby sucking on Matty. It's like the wet, thick ticking of a moist, living clock across the room. He squeezes little Joey so tight up into his face he can't tell at all where he begins and the baby leaves off. One of them is crying.

Phil Condon

Confessions

I once hung my son
by the straps of his overalls
on a utility hook
nailed into the garage wall.
He laughed at his father's mischief,
and I dashed for the house
to fetch the instamatic,
so I might snap
his scrapbook smile.
Somewhere that print still records
how the straps, as he struggled there,
must have snugged the bib
up under his chin.
Still, I stepped back to focus
on mirth and madness suspended
above and below his grin
where half his face flushed
blood-rush crimson,
the other half grayed, hushed blue.

I once shoplifted
a tin of Vienna sausages.
I crouched in the aisle
as if to study the syllables
of preservatives, tore off the lid,
pulled out a weiner and sucked it
down. I cruised the produce,
pocketed a nectarine, popped
seedless grapes into the hopper
fast as my choppers would chew.
A man in a bloody white apron
intercepted me at the checkout
after he'd sniffed out my trail
of banana peel, cellophane
candy wrappers, pistachio shells,
and an exhausted bottle
of chocolate moo.

I've cheated on exams,
made love to fold-outs,
and once I walked my paper route
backwards in a snowstorm after dark,
so I could steal down a particular alley

where through her gauze curtains
a lady I've never forgotten
lounged with her nightgown
undone.

I have overcharged
neighbors and friends. Once
my tiniest daughter bounded in the back door
beaming, her fist full of wadded
five dollar bill. She'd unearthed it
on the playground

and I swapped her
that five-spot for a fifty cent piece,
shiny enough to mingle with a few pennies
until her plastic purse jingled with joy.
Maybe too young to know the disguises
of change, but she told her brother
about a proud bird on one side of her coin,
and on the other side, a man's face
turned away.

And I've neglected birthdays
of people who remember mine.
First week of December last year
an old friend mailed to me a shirt and tie.
I wore the shirt twice, decided I didn't like it,
wrapped it for my brother
and laid it under the tree on Christmas eve.
Without the tie.

So many excuses
I have concocted to get by.
I call in sick when I'm not.
I've grabbed credit
for happy accidents
I had no hand in;
pointed fingers to pin the innocent
with crimes unmistakably mine.
I've been so desperate not to look a fool.
Once instead of facing the fast balls,
I leaned back of home plate
and swung to hit
the catcher's arm.
I took a free base.
He wore a bruise I had to look at
for weeks in the halls of school.

I've thrown sticks at stray dogs.
I've ignored the cat
scratching to come inside.
Even in the rain.
I've sat for idle hours
in front of the tv, and not two feet away
the philodendrons for lack of a glass of water
have gasped
and expired.
More than once I have awakened
to my love, crying
her confessions beside me,
and I have feigned the lifeless sleep
of an ancient stone.

Lord, I have failed
to learn from grievous error.
I have repeated
gossip. I have invented
gossip. I have held hands
in a circle of friends
to rejoice over the misfortunes of strangers.
I have pushed over tombstones.
I have danced the devil's jig.
Once, when I was barely old enough
to walk on my own
balanced on the ties and cinders
behind an abandoned garage
-- I counted sixteen windows --
and needed only four handfuls of stones
to break every one.

Lowell Jaeger

Traveling Back

Traveling back from Hot Springs last
night, late enough to worry not
on all I had left that day undone,
a side road often I had passed
called in the voice of a million yellow flowers.
For once I didn't think twice, how the sun
was low, whole days lost in tracking hours
across a map. *Give in. The day's shot,*
said the gravel spitting under my wheels
and I let that lane lead me where it would.
Laughing, lost, an outlaw on the roam
pleased at the breeze on my face and how it feels
to park along the cutbank where I stood
in the flow of pretending I might never go home.

Lowell Jaeger

The Real Chair of Cassiopeia

In 1951, Ellen Austin's father put on a pair of sunglasses that looked like goggles and sat in a lawn chair to watch an atomic bomb test. He wasn't alone. Lots of other men wearing goggles sat in similar chairs which were arranged in orderly rows on the sand of the desert. Many of the men wore shorts. She still has a picture of this that her father gave her the afternoon he returned home.

Though the bomb went off at night, the men in the picture appear to be sitting on a bench at mid-day. These observers were illuminated by the light from the blast. When the bomb went off, her father lifted his hand to protect his vision and wound up looking through the flesh to the bone. His hand had turned into an x-ray right before his eyes.

He told her this when he got home in a voice that was filled with awe and a sense of privilege. She was nine at the time and she has never forgotten that afternoon when, half-kneeling beside her as she sat in the back-yard swing of the old house in Louisiana, he told her about holding up his hand to shield his eyes, and gave her a photograph. The amazing thing for her was, after that afternoon, for reasons she has never completely understood and never felt courageous enough to explore, he disappeared from her life.

HE DISAPPEARED from her life until one evening, thirty-odd years later, when she picked up the phone and heard a voice drained of almost everything that voices have, a voice which, except for a trace of New Orleans in the vowels, could have been generated by a computer. "This is Corbett Austin," the voice said, "And I'd like to speak to my daughter Ellen."

"This is Ellen." She stood without allowing herself a breath and felt a needle and thread working their way up through her body taking stitches, making everything tighter.

"You're not Ellen," this shell of a voice said. "I have a daughter Ellen. I'd like to speak to her. This is Corbett Austin, her father."

After something muttered which Ellen couldn't understand, a woman said, "I'm a nurse here. He's confused. He expected a little girl. He'll understand later. He's in a veteran hospital right here in Los Angeles. He has leukemia. You should probably come."

Then Corbett took the phone again. "Tell Ellen that Corbett Austin, her father, is dying."

YEARS AGO, the same year that her father saw the bomb go off, Ellen had been in Girl Scouts and she very much wanted a badge called the Star Badge which involved knowing constellations and being able to use the night sky for orientation. It just so happened that the next door neighbor, a Miss Galena Belov, had an interest in the stars and offered to instruct Ellen.

"Cassiopeia's Chair is that W-shaped configuration of stars," Miss Galena had said, pointing. "It's right there between Cepheus and Perseus. Cassiopeia did an awful thing, you know..."

A follower of Madame Blavatsky, Miss Galena not only showed Ellen the patterns made by the stars against the sky, but she told stories that the Greeks had made up, and then rambled on about transmutations of the soul, sylphs in the air, and salamanders in the fire.

Whenever the night was clear that autumn, Ellen would go next door, and then, after Miss Galena threw on her shawl, the two of them would go out into the cool evening and sit on lawn chairs, much as Corbett had, and, like Corbett, turn their eyes skyward--looking for signs in the heavens.

TONIGHT, HOLDING a glass of wine in a shaking hand, Ellen stands on the deck of her house in Los Angeles and tries to recall those evenings in Louisiana. She has just put down the telephone after talking to her father, and the conjunction of her father's call and this evening's sky has opened the door to this recollection--a recollection she finds disturbing without understanding why. She scans the sky to locate Cassiopeia but none of the stars she can see in the light-blurred night seems quite right.

Her hand is shaking because of the call from her father. Her hand is shaking because suddenly she is afraid. Though her daughter is inside lying in a pool of light on the living-room floor writing something for a class tomorrow, Ellen feels completely alone. She feels that there is something out there and she has been abandoned to it.

"I JUST got a call from Corbett," Ellen says into the phone. An hour or so has passed and the terror subsided enough that she has decided to call Louisiana to talk to her mother. She holds a second glass of wine in a hand which seems almost steady.

"Corbett... Your father?" Ellen can hear her mother Winnie's

voice falter and lose the schoolgirl brightness she always affects on the phone.

"That Corbett. I don't know any others."

"Well, I guess I should hear what he wants," her mother says. Her voice is guarded now. "Not that it matters to me."

"He has leukemia. He's here in Los Angeles in a hospital and he wants to see me." Ellen can feel the constriction begin again. She is speaking as flatly as she can. She doesn't want to tilt anything.

"Corbett ... dying?" Winnie's voice changes again and takes on the years she usually manages to avoid.

"I thought you should know."

"Yes," her mother says and her voice changes again, re-constructs itself. "Well, I think I should come."

Ellen has not expected this. "Mother... You've been divorced from him for thirty-five years. You've had two husbands since then."

Her mother sighs. "I just think I'll never forgive myself if I don't. It's never too late to set old wrongs right."

"DOES ANYONE join Girl Scouts anymore?" Ellen asks her daughter.

Caitlin, thirteen, rolls over on the rug and lifts both legs and studies her feet. Ellen can see that she has just painted her toes alternating shades of silver and blue. "I don't know. They had Campfire girls when we lived in Encino but I didn't know anyone in them. Why?"

"I just got a call from your grandfather."

Caitlin sits up. "Your father? The one you haven't seen for years?"

"Yes. He's ill. He's right here in a hospital. I'm going to see him tomorrow."

"Do you think he'll get well?" Caitlin asks, and Ellen can see her daughter weighing things. Caitlin has never known a grandfather, and Ellen watches the girl try to know whether she has any reason to expect anything--in case she might be disappointed. It surprises Ellen tonight to realize that she has raised such a cautious child.

"I'll know more after I see him," Ellen says. "Winnie is flying out too. So I guess there'll be a reunion of sorts."

"That'll be nice," Caitlin says in a voice that seems to Ellen to mirror her own anxieties, her own inability to sound an optimistic note. "Why did you want to know about Girl Scouts?"

"Just something I remembered. I'd earned a badge while my father was away and I wanted to show it to him, but he left before

I could. I had to learn to identify some constellations. The only one I can remember is Cassiopeia, but I couldn't find it tonight when I went out on the deck."

"It's hard to see stars here because of all the smog and lights," Caitlin says, matter-of-fact once more. "If you want to see stars you should drive to the desert."

"I guess you're right," Ellen says and turns to go back to the kitchen.

"I talked to Dad this afternoon," Caitlin says. "He has to be in Denver on business Monday morning and he has to fly out on Sunday, so he wants to come for me Friday afternoon instead of Saturday."

Ellen resists her first impulse to be annoyed at this change of plans. "Fine."

"I'll still get to see Winnie, and ..." She pauses. Her pause makes Ellen sad. Caitlin tonight looks too young to be so concerned.

"Do you want to see your grandfather?" Ellen asks.

"I don't know yet. How do you feel about it?"

"I don't know yet either," Ellen says.

CORBETT AUSTIN is hairless, gaunt and gray, and connected to tubes going in and coming out. An oxygen mask over his lower face makes another claim on his identity. His eyes are closed, for which Ellen is grateful. It gives her time to catch her breath and to study him. She had expected to be shocked and she is. She wonders for a second if she is too late--if he is already dead. It would seem impossible for a live person to look more corpse-like. But the hand which is not linked to the hospital plumbing moves, a jerk as if to brush away an insect. She tiptoes up. Touches that hand.

He opens his eyes, confused. He needs time to focus. They are the same cobalt blue eyes she sees every day in the mirror and she is startled to recognize something of herself in this pared-down face on the pillow. He tries to raise his head but can't. He sticks out his tongue, a tentative pale thing, and tries to lick his lips. He moves his mouth, seems to realize he is not speaking, and tries again.

"I'm Ellen," she whispers. "Your daughter ... Ellen." She waits until there's a spark in the eyes, and then a sigh and then a groan as his talon fingers grasp hers. His groan is an instrument that tightens her breathing as she studies him--this man, here, at last, before her. She has spent years thinking about him and years trying not to. She has been angry and she has longed for him; she has dreamed of searching for him to beg him to return; she has

dreamed of looking into countless doors opening off endless corridors for him. And now he lies here and her search is over.

"You were sitting in the swing," he says when he finally speaks. "You had on a yellow dress."

"A yellow dress ..." she says and finds that she's trembling and her lips have become as dry as his. She does remember. Of course, she remembers, but the fact that he can remember too makes her heart begin to pound. She wants to lie to him right now. She wants to tell him that she can't remember, that there never was a yellow dress. She wants to lie in order to deny him the right to that memory. He took the memory and left the child. The skirt had a band of white rick-rack around the hem. She remembers plucking at the rick-rack. She had just turned ten. It was spring. She didn't like the dress. It had a sash. Babyish. Older girls wore belts. She plucked at the rick-rack and waited for him.

She had kissed him at the front door. She had hugged him. She had been waiting, had seen the taxi drive up. The braid on his shoulder scratched her cheek. He smelled like cigarette smoke and tiredness, but he held her, lifting her off the ground and whirling her around. It was almost like flying. One of her sandals flew off with the speed of the whirling.

But then he saw Winnie coming out of the bedroom upstairs to stand on the landing and he put Ellen down. "Go on outside and wait for me," he said. She went outside and sat in the swing where she could watch the house. She watched and waited and when, much later, he came back out into the yard she knew something had changed and things would be different forever.

He groans now and looks up, but his gaze has lost its focus. She feels herself receding. "I remember," she tells him. "I remember," but his eyes are closed and he appears to have fallen asleep.

"You should probably leave now," a nurse says a few minutes later. "He had his injection just before you came and he'll be out for a while."

WINNIE LOOKS wonderful as she walks out of the tube from the Delta flight from New Orleans. Winnie's hair is blonder than Ellen remembers it, but not brassy. She wears a voguish suit in a pale cream and has managed to keep a gardenia fresh on her lapel.

"Is the flower from home?" Ellen says as the smell of the flower mingles with her mother's powder and hairspray, and her mother's stiff hair tickles her nose.

"No, I bought it at the airport," Winnie says. "I love the scent. I just sat breathing it in all the way here." She looks at

Ellen and Ellen finds herself wincing under her mother's scrutiny. "You've lost weight. How's the divorce going?"

"We're being civilized," Ellen says and stops her tongue before she can recite the litany she has been repeating to herself lately--at least *my* former husband still sees our daughter, at least *he* hasn't disappeared, at least *I* haven't driven him away from *her* forever.

"After the first divorce, the rest are easy," Winnie says. "Have you seen your father yet?"

"Yesterday. He looked terrible. I thought he was dead when I went into the room."

"Oh, dear," Winnie says and her face releases the rigid smile she's been wearing. Ellen picks up her mother's bag and turns away so as not to have to look. "Oh, dear," Winnie repeats.

"I don't know why you came," Ellen says. "It's been years. It's just going to be painful."

"I felt I needed to," Winnie says.

THERE IS no one outside of Corbett's room. Ellen opens the door for Winnie and then walks down the hall to a small waiting room where an Asian family sits staring at a game show on a television set in the corner. They all lean forward with looks of concern on their faces as the bright-eyed host on the set motions and curtains are pulled back to reveal fabulous prizes that Ellen can't imagine anyone wanting.

She turns to a vending machine and puts in money for a can of sugarless caffeine-free soda and pushes a button. When nothing comes out below she gets a chance to pound on the machine, a gesture which does not dispel, but only primes the pump of her anger. She has been angry for years at the two people in the room down the hall. It is a sad sort of anger, an anger like a battered toy that she has clutched and refused to abandon. It is an anger she would like to stuff in a trash can. She pounds again and the Asian family turns to look at her with polite but real distress. The can rolls down some invisible tunnel and almost leaps out of the slot to fall at her feet.

"I'M TRYING to put things in order now, and there are things I should tell you," Winnie says as Ellen drives them back home along the freeway. Winnie's perfect hair is disheveled and her eyes are red. "I was a very young woman then. And Corbett was gone all of the time."

Ellen grips the steering wheel as her breathing grows shallow.

"I was having an affair with someone," Winnie continues, staring straight ahead. "He was married. I was married. It was

an awful thing to do but I thought I was in love with this other man. Someone in town wrote your father. He came back that day to ask me to give up the other man. I didn't want to and so your father left. He sent money for you. He was good about that, but he couldn't stand any of it. I wanted more, you know, than just sitting around waiting for him to come home from wherever that stupid Army sent him."

As Winnie parts with the words, Ellen's head begins to throb. This can't be all, she thinks. This can't be it--this sad confession after so many years--this paltry revelation. And yet her mother leans back when the words are spoken as if she's said all she needed to say. The words are out and Winnie looks spent, used up.

"But you loved Corbett, didn't you?" Ellen asks. It sounds to her, as she says it, like the question of a child, like something Caitlin would ask.

"That's why I flew here." Winnie's voice is like the voice on a telephone thousands of miles away. "That's why I came. I wanted him to know I'd always loved him."

Her mother is quiet again, her eyes closed. Ellen moves into the right-hand lane, turns off the freeway and onto a surface street where she pulls the car beside a curb. They park under a budding sycamore tree. A boy rides by on a bicycle and pops a wheelie. It seems to Ellen to be a time to say something, but she still doesn't know the question to ask. "Do you remember our neighbor years ago, the one in the little house on the corner, Miss Galena?" she says finally.

"God yes! She was that smelly old Russian," Winnie answers. The question has the effect of reviving her. She opens her eyes and blinks as though getting ready to see something completely new. "She filled your mind with a lot of nonsense, I do remember that. She was some odd religion."

"She taught me to identify the constellations for a badge for Girl Scouts. She told me the story of Cassiopeia who put her daughter Andromeda on a rock to be eaten by a sea monster. Cassiopeia had offended the gods and she had to make a sacrifice."

"What a terrible story!" Winnie says and looks shocked. "Well, I don't remember any of that. It was so long ago."

"Did Corbett tell you about the blast when he got home that day? Did he tell you about seeing his hand turn into an x-ray in front of his eyes?"

"Oh, God, Ellen honey, why are you asking me all this?" Winnie says and looks away. "I don't think he told me that. I really don't remember. We had other things, more important things, to talk about."

AFTER DINNER that evening Ellen leaves Winnie and Caitlin sitting at their kitchen table, their heads together over a deck of cards. She tells them she's going for a drive, not to wait up for her. She's a little surprised by how easily they accept this, how involved they are in their game.

She drives south toward the interchange and turns onto the freeway heading east. As soon as she's over the mountains she'll drop onto the Mojave and then she'll see the sky. There'll be stars. She'll find the chair of the queen who put her daughter on a rock. She knows it's crazy, but she needs to do it.

EVENTUALLY, THE mountains are behind and the night is hot in the way that only the desert night can be. She remembers how she woke in the dark and found herself alone in the big old house. She remembers her fear and her mouth dries.

Ellen, the girl, had wondered as Miss Galena told the story what the real chair of Cassiopeia looked like. Was it a throne? Or merely a chair like the ones in their kitchen? Or, was it, perhaps, like the small chair with the flowered cushion that Winnie sat on when she studied her face in the mirror of her dressing table? Ellen, the woman, wonders how much Miss Galena knew about Winnie. Ellen wonders about the motives of ancient storytellers who paired bright spots burning in the void with tales of terror and abandonment.

She stops at a gas station to go to the bathroom and to buy coffee from a machine. A little beyond the gas station there's a side road, a narrow thing, one lane. She turns onto it. Of course, it's crazy.

The road climbs a bit and twists to avoid a small hill. She downshifts and presses on the gas. Then the pavement stops abruptly and she's going too fast to miss the sharp rocks that suddenly appear in her lights. She curses and isn't surprised a moment later when the steering becomes difficult and the car veers to the right.

The tire is flat. More than flat, it has lost all of its air and is already peeling itself from the rim in a disheartening way that she isn't prepared for. There is another tire in the trunk and a jack and so on, but these events are just enough to make her feel both foolish and exhausted. She gets out and stands beside the car. She's trembling. She has to hold onto the door for a moment until the shaking subsides.

She had wanted to walk out into the desert to look at the sky. Now, this seems beside the point. There are stars enough, and the desert is there, but she's tired, and in this tiredness she realizes that she knows all she is going to know. She rests her head on the roof of the car. On the highway below a truck backfires.

Robin Beeman

Early Shift

What moves him to wake
from dark into dark,
to wander sleep-baffled
from bed to the lighted hall?
What shakes the dream out,
this slow acceptance in?
He pulls back the curtain,
sees the homes of his neighbors,
faces what makes him daily
rise, the spin of wheels
and gears that requires him
to dress his body, one arm,
one leg at a time, and feed it.
He passes each morning the beds
of his children, touches his lips
to the rise and fall of their sheets,
but resists his desire
to lift their charmed bodies
and carry them with him,
never speaks to calm
the muttering that breaks
from his wife as she sleeps.
What in that blue dawn makes him
shine his car lights into day,
knowing when he comes back
none of this will be changed?

Martha Wickelhaus

Fishing the Brazos

Behind the outhouse, we trapped crawdads
in the creek Grandpa used as his private
flowing latrine. Catfish in the Brazos a mile away
waited for us, old whiskers floating.

The heavy ones we wanted lay in shade
on the bottom like lazy bulls.
Big catfish our uncles took on trotlines
weighed more than us, their oily,

leather lips wider than our skulls.
And so, after we roped ourselves
for anchors to the nearest trees,
we rigged broom handles with bailing wire

twisted to hooks. Skewered, crawdads made
the perfect bait. They squished
as big hooks punctured them. Held out,
they writhed like fat pale spiders.

We held them squirming and watched them,
then heaved them into the brown, muddy Brazos,
feet set against the explosion of hunger,
the appearance of things not seen.

Walter McDonald

Harvest Letter

This morning, crusted frost
sequined the grass. Now it has faded
and dried. The October sun scatters
tons of sunlight (if sunlight could be measured)
across the front porch.

I'm trying to tell you
about the calves, which, after eating,
wandered into the back field,
and became engulfed in wheat.
This is the harvest season. Combines come
through, chopping. The calves were short.
Andrew, driving, did not see them.

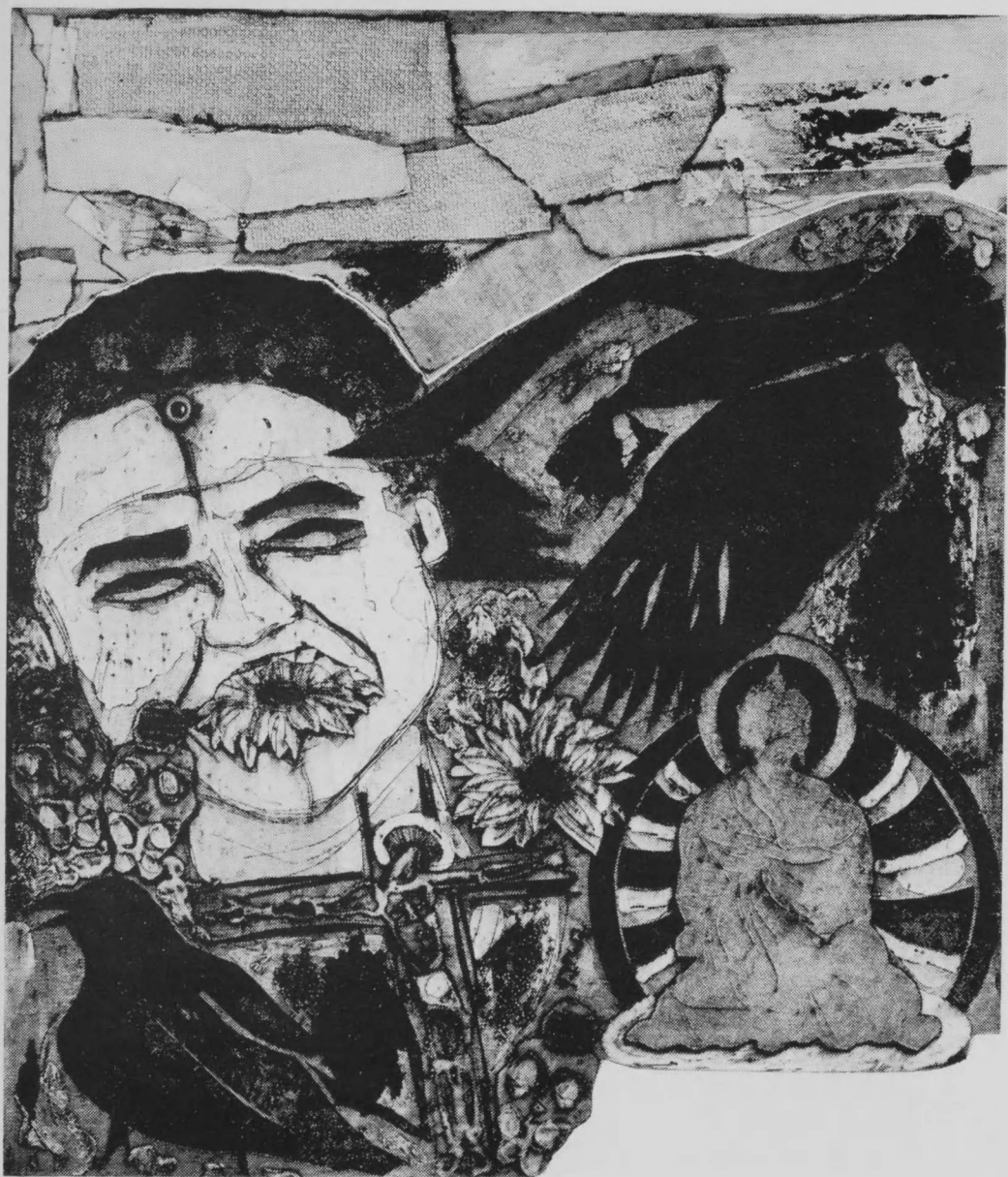
Animals die
so cheaply on farms. I come into the farmhouse
and prepare chicken or lamb; and even Lucy, the old cat,
gave birth to dead kittens, little wrappings
of twisted flesh and sinew.

I'm thinking
of the summer you were here, with all the cousins,
and we climbed the only tree along the west side
of the back field. The wheat was shallow,
and jumping and falling like apples from the branches,
we were bruised and sore.

You jumped the furthest,
arching into the wind. Landing, yelling up
that you could catch us all, you spread your arms
wide. We jumped cautiously,
and as each of us hit ground, you ran to us, laughing,
holding the ground still.

Now you
are in another world. The harvest comes.
I watch the thin vein of the river pour
out past the end of the horizon and wonder:
what is it, on the other end, that pulls us in?

John December



Raven-Song II
Collagraph by Bev Beck Glueckert



An Indestructible Certainty
collagraph by Bev Beck Glueckert

Embarazada

A pregnant woman standing in the hallway
Pushing her hair over her shoulder
Wearing a blue coat
A pregnant woman
You watch from a crack in the door,
Then close it, turn away,
A low sickness where you begin
A pregnant woman
Makes you want to finish the sentence.
A pregnant woman
Who was five when we moved next door
Whose mother played piano and had red hair
A potato chip factory behind the house
Yellow cotton playsuit, red trike, stuffed bear
A pregnant woman
Who lives on welfare and has boyfriends
Sold the piano and remembers me not at all.
A pregnant woman
Walking ahead of me to the clinic
Carries an infant and pushes a stroller
Leaves her low weight cocaine baby at the clinic & disappears.
A pregnant woman
In a polka dot maternity dress. The only one she had.
Every time she took it out my heart sank. Another
Mouth to feed. Her mother, sick in bed for months. Her death.
A pregnant woman
Who cried the last three months of her term.
Funny word, term. Like prison. She threw things.
Cried all day. Bit the backs of her hands till they bled
Afterwards, she stayed that way.
A pregnant woman
Stands at the stove. Turns slowly, like in a dream,
Mouth open, hand rising, peas and onions flying in the grease
Across the table, real slow moving, a constellation,
Lands like a curse. Afterwards she stayed that way.

Sheryl Noethe



Against the Odds
collagraph by Bev Beck Glueckert

Who Frankenstein Is to Me & Why I Have the Big Head Dream

Frankenstein is coming up the stairs to get me
Dripping mud arms held straight out Thumping
His way up the stairs like the corpse he is
And I run bed to bed

Then I dream the room is too small for my head.
I dream from a little bed. I rise from it like big bread
First my hands, too big for the room, then my head
Swells up. Fills the bed. Spills over. Tips the bed.

I dreamt things were too big and too small for years.
My head. His hands. See?
This is who Frankenstein is to me
It's Uncle coming up to bed

I remember that much. Then comes the dream of the big head
That gets too big to stay in the room
The hands get too big to stay in my bed, See
This is who Frankenstein is to me

I have heard his thunderous step for years
Just when he gets into the bed with his criminal's hands
I have the dream that my head is too big
I remember it like somebody'd put Mickey Mouse gloves on a man
Big cartoon hands, giant round thumbs, the wrong hands.
Bug-out eyes. A toy in his pants, or a small pet.
When they ran out of humans they used animal parts
A rat's heart, a lizard's lips. Think of him as a dead man
Using borrowed power tools.

Sheryl Noethe

The Voice of America

Pop hit Mom. I heard it, then I heard Mom. She yelled. She started to cry. I unplugged my earphones from my shortwave radio and came out of my room, blinking in the bright light of the kitchen. Mom was sitting at the table and Pop--Wade Eggers--was leaning over her. I went up to him and hammered him. I nailed him. He went down in slow motion, like a swamped boat. I still had my earphones on. I started to kick him but Mom said "Don't, honey," real loud, in that voice of hers that makes you think Jesus is in the next room, watching. So I quit. I had no great hate for him. I had no feeling for any of them. By "them" I mean the men she picked out for herself. I was just sick and tired of it. "It" meaning her life and what she dragged along behind it, me included. If I had some dynamite just then I probably would have lit it. In my mind I have burned that house in National City down to the foundation a thousand times, everyone asleep inside. I dreamed of waking up as someone else, in a different place, where things were decent. "Good bye, forever," I said. I meant it this time.

Mom was drunker than Pop. She got up and went into the living room. I followed her. Blood hung on her lip like a dark red grape. A drop fell onto her carpet. She always said she loved that carpet. It was a fake oriental made in Mexico. "I'm gone," I said. I kicked the television. It was a big cherrywood Packard Bell with a twelve inch screen. A clay penguin on top fell off and broke, but Sid Caesar on the screen didn't flicker.

"I don't want you to leave," she said. "Where can you go, honey?"

I picked up the Packard Bell and let it drop. I looked around for something else to pick up and drop. The china cupboard.

"Stop it!" she yelled. She held one hand up to her face. "Stop it!" Her fingers trembled, like she had taken all she could. But I had seen all this before many times. There was no end to what she could take. That's how it seemed. It was an act. Everything is an act.

I went back into the kitchen. Pop had pulled a bread knife out of a drawer. That made me blow up. I hit him as hard as I had ever hit anyone. This time he flopped when he went down. His eyes rolled up showing the whites. His mossy tongue hung out. I put my hands around my mouth and called down to him, like he was in a hole. "Pop, I'll hurt you this time, I mean it," I said.

To show I was serious I kicked his gut. I walked on him. He started arching his back and waving his arms so as to call me off. I picked him up by his shirt and slammed him a few times

on the wall. His head bounced. During all this I still had my earphones on. "Stop it, baby!" Mom yelled. "You'll kill him!"

In my earphones her yelling sounded like so much whimpering music. Let her whimper to Jesus, I thought, as I drummed the wall with Pop. I thought about all the times--when I was younger--how I cried in my bed while she and whatever man she had at the time fought and yelled, sometimes with strangers they had brought into our house. I would put on my war surplus earphones with the big rubber pads and plug them into my war surplus BC-348 shortwave receiver and try to pick up the Voice of America. But I could hear them right through the Voice of America.

I thought, as I slammed Pop, about the many times I had sat alone in a car outside some bar in Enid, Oklahoma, Fort Worth, Texas, Bakersfield, California or Tijauna, Mexico. I thought about the motel and hotel rooms I had slept in as a child waiting for someone to come for me while a world of strangers cursed and cried in the hallways and small rooms above and below and to all sides. These things are not so terrible--I have heard of worse--but they add up after a while and you learn to hate them. We had no real home and the stink of liquor and the noise of their lives was something I always ached to get away from. But leaving isn't easy. There are things you have to think about. Mom married Wade when I was thirteen. He was her fourth husband, if I have counted correctly. None of them was any good. Wade was the worst. I had seen him pick up a knife before, though he never had guts enough to use it.

I went back into my room. The yellowish glow of the dials on the BC-348 looked like two sour smiles. I plugged my earphones back in and searched around for the Voice of America. I loved to listen to the Voice of America. You could listen to all your favorite radio programs as they were broadcast across the oceans to Communist countries so that the people who lived in them could hear how it was to live in the Land of the Free. Jack Benny, Duffy's Tavern, Truth or Consequences, Counterspies, The Great Gildersleeve, and so on. I had copper wire strung out to the eucalyptus tree in the back yard for good reception. I found the Voice of America in the thirty-one meter band, but they just had Walter Winchell on or somebody like that with the latest bad news.

"I don't want you to go, baby," Mom said. She had come into my room. She stood behind me and my radio equipment. She lifted one earphone away from my head so I could hear her. Then she put her hands on me. I shook her off. She was so stupid with booze she didn't know how to act. She hardly ever knew how to act. Some people just aren't ready for the world from the time they are born. She is one of them. This had to be the tenth time she begged me not to leave.

"I'm going anyway," I said. I was seventeen, almost eighteen, and big. I had talked to a Marine recruiting sergeant. Korea was still going on. They needed men. I lifted weights at my friend Dick Drummond's house. I could military press two hundred and dead lift three. I was ready. To leave her behind.

She put her hand on my bicep which I hardened. "I'd be here alone with him if you went away, honey," she said, squeezing around on my arm as if looking for soft spots.

I took off the earphones and turned around. "That's your problem," I said. "Leave him, if you don't want to take that crap," I said.

"You know I've stayed with him for your sake, baby," she said. "Baby, you *know* that's the only reason I've stuck it out. I wanted you to have a home."

This was too stupid for words. But I had heard it before and was tired of telling her how stupid it was. It was worse than stupid. It was a lie. This was a lie that she believed herself. How people could lie to themselves, and *believe* it, was the miracle of human life as far as I was concerned. I'd seen her do it, I'd seen Wade Eggers do it. I have seen others do it since. If you need to believe something bad enough, you *do*. She sat down on my bed and started crying again. "You could be like Jesus," she said. "Any boy could, if he wants to let it out, if he isn't too scared." This was booze talking. Her Jesus talk made me want to hit her. I got up and left the room.

Pop was puking into the kitchen sink. The kitchen was heavy with the stink of bourbon-puke. She could really pick the winners. I went into their bedroom and took the keys to the Pontiac off the dresser. Then I went out to the car and unlocked it. Pop, at the kitchen window, saw what I was up to. He rapped the glass with a knife. He came stumbling out of the house.

"Don't you dare touch my car," he said.

"Go to hell, you goddamned Communist," I said, ramming the gear lever into first and spraying gravel.

I don't know why I called him Communist. He considered himself self-educated and had a superior attitude. He read books and when he came to a good part he'd read it out loud, no matter who was there or whether or not they cared about the good parts. Pop drove a sandwich and coffee truck and parked it outside the gates of defense plants at lunch time and at shift changes. That's how he made his living. It gave him a lot of time to read books. On the Voice of America, Walter Winchell said the Communists were in high places, getting ready to take over the country. They wanted to change how we thought. They had sneaky ways to do this and so you had to keep your guard up. Watch out for those teachers and professors who say things that downgrade our nation.

I didn't worry about it. I figured my teachers were too stupid to be Communists. But Pop wasn't stupid. He'd put on his F.W. Woolworth reading glasses and say things like, "Jesus Christ was not the son of God. He was just a good magician. He fooled the gullible with slight-of-hand tricks and with hypnotic spells. Just add him to your list of ego-maniac Jews." Mom hated this type of talk since she was religious, or at least she believed in God and Jesus, and that it was bad luck to bad-mouth them. Pop devilled her for fun.

I drove over to Dick Drummond's house. It was still early enough for him to be up, though his folks were in bed. I honked the horn in his driveway, two longs and two shorts, so he'd know it was me. He came down in about a minute.

"What's happening, Shit-hook," he said. Dick was a wise ass. He got in the car and the first thing he did was switch on the radio. He searched around until he found the L.A. station that played nothing but R and B, which you could not find on a local station. Local DJs thought Johnny Ray was as cool as it got. They thought Les Paul and Mary Ford were hip.

I burned rubber coming out of his driveway and caught a yard of second gear rubber in the street. Dick whistled, but he was being a wise ass. Dick had his chopped deuce coupe with a full-race '51 Merc engine in it and he could lay a mile of high gear rubber shifting up from second doing sixty. So a 1949 Pontiac with a low compression six didn't exactly impress him even though I was pretty good at nailing second with a speedshift.

"Check the mirror, Dad," he said. "I think you left the transmission in the road." Coming from Dick Drummond this was a compliment. Dick was tall and lean. He could bench press a ton but he couldn't clean-and-jerk worth spit. No legs.

I headed out to the beaches. Dick had the radio turned up full blast. Lloyd Price was singing "Mail Man, Mail Man." We were on a dark street in Pacific Beach. Dick said, "Stop here a second, Dad." I pulled the car over to the curb. Dick got out and walked over to the store front. He raised his foot, then looked at me with a comical expression on his face. Dick could be a bad actor. I knew he could do it if he was in the mood. He was wearing engineer boots. I shrugged. He straightened his leg into the window and it bowed in then exploded. Dick danced back from the falling glass. Then he reached into the window and picked up a suitcase. He carried it to the car and threw it into the back seat. I popped the clutch, laid yards of rubber, speed-shifted into second, caught another yard of rubber. I hit third with another speed-shift but there wasn't any top-end power left and the Pontiac just wobbled a little and flattened out.

Up in LaJolla where all the bankers and doctors live, Dick had me drive alongside parked cars, real slow, while he reached out of his window with a jack handle and knocked off side mirrors and punched holes into windows. I saw a kid's bike lying out on a sidewalk. I hopped the curb and mashed it. Dick laughed.

Back down in Mission Beach we picked up a couple of girls. They were gang-girls who'd been dumped. Their hands were tattooed. Dick had Julia and I had Inez. We drove up to Torrey Pines and found a dark spot looking over the moonlit ocean. On the radio: Earl Bostick playing "Flamingo." It was real romantic, and Dick had Julia's pants off in half a minute, but I had too much on my mind for it. Inez said, "What's wrong, mon? You feeling out of it, baby? No quieres nookie, mon?" She was good-looking enough, but I didn't feel like it. She was in my lap. Her breath burned my eyes. I turned the radio dial looking for more L.A. R and B stations.

We drove the girls back to Mission Beach then headed home. We didn't talk. We listened to music.

"You okay, Dad?" Dick said when I let him off. "That was fine muff, man. You missed some choice muff."

I shrugged. I backed out of his driveway and headed home. Two blocks down the street I caught high gear rubber by floorboarding the fat Pontiac for a full three or four seconds before I popped the clutch. There was a gravel patch on the street. I slid. The rear fender hit a parked car. This made me laugh. I drove home laughing, tears on my face, singing like Lloyd Price.

It was late, almost morning. I let myself in through the back way and went to my room. I felt ripped, like I'd been into the wine. I turned on the BC-348 and looked for The Voice of America. It was lost in static, on every band. Then I found an American-sounding announcer saying how the Chinese were kicking the Americans out of Korea and how cities in the U.S.A. were full of crime and how the whites hated the Negroes. It was Radio Moscow. I gave Radio Moscow the finger through the glow of the dials. Then I went to bed.

"Jesus planned this out," Mom was saying. She was sitting on my bed. The sun was up. She'd been talking, thinking that I was awake even though my eyes were closed.

"What?" I said.

"He's gone, honey," she said. "Pop. He left an hour ago. He's not coming back." She dabbed a tear out of the corner of her eye. "He was destined to stay four years three months, and now he's gone. I believe Jesus had this in mind for me."

My hand was sore. I looked at it. It had swollen up and the knuckles were raw and blue. I wondered what he had in store for me. I didn't believe there was anything in store for anyone. People just let themselves believe any bullshit that makes things easier for them. I said it before: this amazes me.

"Oh God, you gave him a terrific wallop, honey," she said.

"He's gone?" I said.

"I've never seen a terrific wallop like that."

"You mean he's not coming home tonight?"

She sneered, and for a second, though everyone always said she was a very pretty woman, she looked ugly. Then she smiled and was pretty again. "Not tonight, not any night. He's gone." She picked up my hand and kissed it. Her lips lingered on each battered knuckle as if to heal it. "I'll make you a nice breakfast, baby," she said.

Breakfast sounded good. It had been a long night. I was hungry.

Rick DeMarinis

While Canoeing the Red Lake River Near Goodridge, Minnesota, We Speak of Direction

We speak of bent willow and goldenrod,
the inevitability of downstream. We speak
a language of airborne seeds, a delicate geometry
floating over the plowed black clods.

Bubbles swirl past,
sticky on the water. A fray of snarled weeds. The slow
current catches us, swings us wide around
into wild rice, nudges the bow against the soft bank.

When we speak, we speak of growth in wheat,
flow in river. What is most abstract is between
us. Our words tangle there, and scrape.

We leave bulrush
and blue gentian, and continue drifting. The riverbottom
rises and falls, its bristle-red weeds combing silence
like a mollusk's foot. Looking down into the water,
I wonder what is actually moving; we seem snagged
while the weeds, unanchored, roll downstream.

Occasionally, a pile of beaver sticks, cleaned white,
on the bottom. The large rodents have eaten
what they needed to get through winter. I love their
tangible efforts: the bare sticks, the mounded lodge,
the woven dams. The half-cut popple
notched to fall riverward.

Wheat and corn revolve around us.
We think we are the center, that we have placed ourselves here.
That because of us, brown mallards panic from cattails,
that the rice surrounds us, rustling its ripe
maroon heads against the canoe.

In this silver slot
amid green, our abstractions are carried away by the water
the way a hawk glides and turns, effortless
over fallow fields. The way a lover, leaving,
can imagine the same river many miles upstream
and find it much more beautiful there.

Todd Frederickson

Volunteer

When I get home from work at the hospital I phone my friend Donna to bend her ear. "This was the worst day yet," I begin like always.

"You said that last week," Donna says.

"I can't help it. It was the real worst." Then I tell her about feeding soup to a man who had two broken arms and one leg hanging from chains over his bed. "It was awful," I say. "Hot alphabet soup. I spilled at least half of every spoonful. He was a mess." Then I think of him lying there, his chest strewn with little letters that no one could make sense of. "I'm a disaster in pink," I tell Donna. "I'm pathetic."

"I hope I never have to be on your floor," she answers. I think how at first the man tried to help, pushing his head out a little toward the spoon when he saw it coming. Then he just lay back against the pillows and let it fall all over. "Don't worry about it," he said as I wiped him with a towel. "It's only soup."

"You don't have to do that shit, Martha," Donna says. "I mean it's not like you're even getting paid to. You're loco. We've got that geometry test tomorrow. Now when are you going to study?"

* * *

The first week I'd told her the worst part was the uniform they made me wear. Pink and white striped pinafores. Give me a break. I'd look at myself in the mirror and laugh.

But now, the uniform is nothing. My one white blouse is already in shreds, an elbow ripped out, torn shoulder seams, buttons lost forever. Good riddance. I toss it in the trash and find a white turtleneck in my mom's drawer. Last week I replaced the white knee socks with a pair of my old black tights. Both my sneakers have huge holes over the big toes. But no one on my floor cares. They have important stuff to worry about.

When everyone's been fed and the trays cleared away, I can sign out. I come home dead tired, my knees throbbing.

"What about that homework?" my mother yells from the kitchen.

"I'm going right up to do it," I say. "Don't panic."

Sometimes I spread the books out on my desk and open them to the chapters we've been assigned. Then I stand there looking down at them, the little light bulb illuminating just the big black letters of the headings: *The Old World's Greatest Pharaohs*, *Using the Quadratic Equation*, *The Present Perfect Tense*.

I pull the rubber band off my pony tail, unbutton the two

stupid buttons of the pinafore, and pitch it in the corner over the face of my old doll, Miss Whiney Wanda. Pick her up, and she cries. Drop her on her head in the corner, she cries. Put something over her face and she shuts up.

* * *

One night Donna and I listen to a Lenny Bruce album called *What I Was Arrested For*. It's something I found in my mother's bottom drawer, underneath some old nightgowns and the dirty joke book she and my father must have laughed their guts out over. My mother has grown so serious in the ten years since my father died that it's hard to picture them as they must have been in the old days, lying in bed, reading jokes, giggling, kicking the covers around.

"Hey, we could cut an album like this, " says Donna. "I mean with the same title, huh?"

We're drinking gin and Fresca. It's awful. "Lenny Bruce was a friggin' genius," I say. "OK, wait, wait. Now listen to this."

To is a preposition. Come is a verb. To come. The verb intransitive.

I live in a state of perpetual groundedness. We hang around with the wrong crowd, Donna's mother keeps telling her. We're in too big a hurry to grow up--that's what my mother says. I don't know what the truth is. All I knew is that some nights nothing can stop me. Carrying my holey sneakers in one hand, I tiptoe down to the basement, then climb up on the washing machine, and squeeze myself out through a small window. I have to suck in my breath to pull my belly and hips through.

Then the car. My mother's little bubble-mobile, an old black VW. I let off the emergency brake, run around to the back, and start pushing. Just as it gets rolling down the hill of our driveway, I hop in. I'm halfway down the block and already shifting into third, my heart pumping in an unwinnable race with itself, before I even turn the key.

I pick up Donna who waits under a big elm at the end of her street. The last time there was a big orange moon. She'd brought a mason jar of diet rootbeer and gin. She shook it up. *La Cucaracha*, she sang. We'd done all this a few times before and we thought it would never get old.

I drove us across the state line to a truckstop where boys who'd graduated a year or two ago liked to come late at night in their souped-up cars. I was in love with one or maybe two of them.

"Let's count all the laws we're breaking," Donna said. She'd drunk half the jar already.

"Driving with no license; that's one," I said.

"Good, ok. Being over the state line. Isn't that bad? Yeah, that's bad. Being out after curfew. But we've been up on that one before. How many's that?"

"You forgot being intoxicated," I said.

"Well, yes, sure, there's always that."

Gluteus Maximus and Pectoral Majors Nitely. Now that's clean. To you, schmuck, but it's dirty to the Latins, Lenny is saying. We roll over on our backs and laugh.

Before the cops caught up with us that last time, we'd been kissing some boys in the parking lot. The moon was low, right over our shoulders. I never knew what to do when a tongue came into my mouth. Did I let it touch *my* tongue?

Donna didn't know the answer either. We'd stopped to pee somewhere, still in the wrong state, as we discovered later.

"Hey, we're two sheets in the wind," she called from behind her bush.

"Shit, that's not a laundry thing," I called back. "That's a sailing thing. Two sheets *to* the wind. Get it. We're blown away."

That's when we saw the red light whirling. I still had to pee some more.

"Oh God," Donna said. "Not again."

Yeah, Grandma Moses' tits and Norman Rockwell's ass. Draw my ass and win a Buick, Lenny says like a gameshow host. It's one of my favorite bits.

In the police station Donna missed the chair when she tried to sit down, which looked bad for us, since we'd been denying the fact of our drinking. We'd left the mason jar behind a bush in the other state.

"Now, this is the third time for you girls," the sergeant said. "Know what that means?"

We just stared at our hands.

"It means a big waste of taxpayer money, that's what. It means court time."

A classic Bruce line floats down from the stereo shelf: *Some dead time in purgatory.* God, for a funny guy, he was so smooth.

* * *

"It was horrible today," I tell Donna, having survived another week.

"Yeah, so what else is new?"

They brought this boy in tonight. He was a mess, I mean a total mess. Big patches of what looked like mud all over him, but it wasn't mud. It was dried blood. Nurse Jacobs told me what

happened. How he'd been lying for hours in a ditch somewhere. She said I should take his parents some coffee. They were standing outside his door like a couple of zombies. So I hand them the coffees. Like that's my big job, right? The cops found his motorcycle up the road a hundred yards from where he was.

"My mother won't let me near a motorcycle," Donna says. "She freaks."

"But wait, I'm coming to the worst part. So then I'm standing there talking to the mother, and her hands are shaking so bad she's spilling coffee all over her fur coat, when this intern comes out of the guy's room, and then he kind of looks around. You know, like he's looking for someone. Then he looks right at me. *You*, he says. Maybe you'll know how to get this thing off. Come on in here."

"Oh Jeez, Martha," Donna says.

"Yeah, so I follow him in, and there are maybe ten doctors and all sorts of people around his bed. Machines bleeping from all directions. And they make a little space for me right up beside him. They'd just finished cutting off his boots with an electric knife or something. Can you believe that? They were split wide open.

"So what were *you* supposed to do? I don't get it."

"Well then I hear someone say, 'Hey, she's a teenager. Maybe she can get that ID bracelet off.' And they're pointing at this blood-caked thing on his arm. They couldn't x-ray him, they said, till they got it off. Everyone's hurrying me like crazy and so I just lean over and find the clasp, which I could barely feel for all the blood and gunk. It was one of those kinds where you have to press the two little edges *in*, you know. So I did. I pressed really hard and it just fell right off his arm."

"Was he cute?" Donna asks.

"Cute, schmoot," I say, suddenly realizing I only saw his face for a second. But why? Didn't I have the guts to look? Then I remember how when the bracelet came loose, I felt all the bodies around the bed let out a breath together, a sigh.

"Toooo much," says Donna. "What a place."

"Yeah," I say, feeling how tired I am, standing in the hallway, still wearing my black tights and white turtleneck.

* * *

Part of the triumvirate agreement--between my mother, the Vice Principal, and Jerry, my probation officer--was a weekly note my mother was to write to each of the other two, and which I was to take to my weekly meeting with each. *One more strike and you're out*, my mother told me. That's what the sergeant told her,

and she believed it. She believed *out* meant the Girls' Juvenile Detention Center, and one afternoon she'd drive me by it.

"Where *are* we going?" I demanded.

She pulled the bug over to the side of the road. "Right here. There it is," she said. "Think about it, Martha."

It was a tall, yellow-brick building that looked like it could have belonged years ago to someone filthy rich. A real mansion. A little stream ran past it. The grass all around was so green and neat. But the black iron fence with the lethal looking spikes on top was definitely bad news. I looked over at her.

"I don't know what I'd do if you were gone. I just don't know." She had her hands on the steering wheel and looked straight ahead like we were still driving.

She wrote out this week's note right in front of me, reading it as she went along: *Martha is trying to improve her attitude. There's less backtalk, but still too much frowning. She did her homework every night this week --* "Except for Tuesday when I worked late," I reminded her. *--every night this week but one. I'm watching her closely.*

* * *

No one had made me start working at the hospital. It was my idea. For nine years we've lived kitty corner to the emergency entrance, and I've never gotten used to the ambulance sirens. It wasn't so much remembering how they'd come for my father and the long night that ended in his death. I'd been just a kid, and I didn't dwell on those days much anymore. But lately--when I hear the sirens wailing, I can't help imagining the tragedies being dragged out the back doors of ambulances: knife wounds, bashed-in skulls, and hearts gone haywire. Often, on my way home from school, I walk past and see an ambulance pull up. Everyone in the parking lot goes into a kind of fast-speed motion, the stretcher wheeled out and then in the big sliding glass doors in one quick fluid movement. Everyone knows what to do.

The first months I was there I was sent to a different floor every week. I wore the white socks then and kept my uniform as clean as the other girls' did, though I didn't iron it. *Candy Stripper*, my mother'd written by mistake on one of her notes to Jerry, and he thought that was the funniest thing. "So tell me, just what does a candy stripper do?" he said, laughing and laughing.

After a couple months, I started to ask to work on this one floor, 2 West, the orthopedic floor. The patients there, most of them, could talk. They'd speak to you when you came in the room. It wasn't like 4 North, where the old people were, where at least once on every shift I'd ever worked there we'd have a closing

of all the doors. This meant they were wheeling out a body. No one was supposed to see the body go by with the sheet pulled up over its face. But everyone knew. I was sent around to close all the doors and told to stay at the end of the hallway, in the last closed-up room. I'd stand by the door and hear the stretcher roll past.

But on 2 West I felt useful. I made beds. I rubbed lotion into backs. I wheeled people out onto the sundeck. I fed them. I brought them bed-pans and took bed-pans away. I watered flowers and plumped pillows. But mostly I listened to their stories in strange installments. One day I'd hear where everything began, and then more sad chapters unfolded as the days and weeks blurred by. I'd fold sheets and blankets and nod, as if I could understand it all, as if the stories somehow really did add up to something.

One day I asked the volunteer supervisor, Mrs. Martin, to have that floor regularly. She looked at me as though thinking it over. I'd been working for four months, which, as she pointed out, was longer than most girls lasted. And it was true. I knew two who'd quit after their first week. A hospital was a place where people bled and filled metal pans with excrement. Not everyone could accept that. "OK," Mrs. Martin said finally. "If that's what you want."

Up on 2 West the nurses knew me now. *Martha*, they'd say, *run this down to the lab and bring us a couple of cokes on the way back.* Nurse Jacobs was the boss, and lately she'd given me this new duty to do every day. It was the actual worst, I knew. Beyond comparison. I hadn't told Donna about it.

It started one afternoon with me bringing cans of pop to the nurses on break. "Hey, maybe Martha can take a coke to the ballerina," said this nurse named Gloria. "You know her? The one in 288?"

"Ok," I said, though I'd never been in that room. Everyone called it the Burns Room. I opened the can and put in a little bendable straw. The other nurses all looked at me briefly, then headed off to the lounge behind the big desk of the nurses' station. I started down the hall.

"Hold on a second, Martha," Nurse Jacobs called. She had a serious look on her face. "You ever been in there before?"

"No," I said. There was a big sign on the door: *No one admitted but family.*

"Well, it's not easy for any of us to go in there." She turned the straw around in the can I was holding. "It takes getting used to. The smell I mean. I just want you to know. It's this salve she's got to soak in."

I nodded.

"She had third degree burns over most of her body. She's just hanging on."

"Was she a real ballerina?" I asked.

"That's what her mother told us one night. She used to be in training with that company, I forget the name. You know, that one downtown?"

"Wow," I said and turned to walk toward the room. I heard my sneakers squeak on the clean grey tiles. I opened the door slowly and started in. That's when I felt the smell pour over me. It took my breath away. I sucked in hard and heard the door click shut behind me. I put both hands around the cold can of coke.

I don't know what I'd been expecting--just a regular old steel bed, I guess. But the girl before me was floating in a huge metal box. A little silver rubber pillow was under her head, another under her hips, and one under the two sticks that were her ankles. I couldn't move. I just stood there and tried to let my eyes adjust to the dim light. The smell was the thick presence of medicine trying to cover up something rotting, flesh that was no longer alive but not yet dead. I couldn't get over how pale she was, and how she could just lie there like that, like so many twigs on the surface of a murky pond.

Then I took a few steps toward her and saw her blue eyes straining up from the red-blistered face to find me, to see who it was who had entered her room.

"How about a coke?" I asked like a damned fool. I moved a little closer. I watched the tips of my dingy sneakers take one step, then another.

Then I was standing over her, directing the ridiculous twisty straw down to her lips. The blue of her eyes was the lightest I'd ever seen. She took a small sip and watched me. I could see the little bump in her throat go up and down.

I held the can and tried not to look at the rest of her, tried to keep my eyes from straying over the red-streaks, the open sores and blisters. I concentrated on keeping my hand steady. I looked at my feet and told her my name. Then I told her she was on the best floor. Everyone here was ok, I said. She sipped and sipped. The little straw wiggled. I said some stuff about school--stupid quizzes every Friday. Drivers Ed--how dumb that was. She didn't say anything, but she watched my face, and when the can was empty and I'd started to go, she blinked her eyelids three times. Maybe that meant goodbye, I thought.

* * *

In January, when the new semester begins, I find myself in this class called Accelerated Biology. We start right off on

genetics, and I'm in hog heaven. Fruit flies are buzzing all over the place. The other girls giggle in their lame little way. After we've covered genetics, the teacher says, we can design our own experiments. I think up this one involving baby chicks, which the teacher says he'll have to order for me. Then one day they arrive, a big box of fifty chirping little fluff-balls. For my experiment I have to pull back the skin on their necks and inject them with hormones, different dosages. I keep incredibly accurate records in my very best penmanship.

At home I don't feel much like sneaking out anymore, at least not with the car and that whole big production. But when the weather starts to warm up again, sometimes I crawl out the window, and me and Donna walk down to the river. Once or twice we meet a couple boys there, but mostly we just sit under a crooked willow and watch the barges slodge by. They move so slowly that if you look straight at one, you can't see it move at all, but if you look at it, then look away, you can tell when you see it again that it's gone a few yards. I don't talk much about the hospital now. Donna says it's too depressing.

By June our six months probation will be up, and the thought of a whole beautiful summer of real freedom stretched out before us is like a warm gust of wind on these cool spring evenings. My mother has made this deal with me: no more trouble and I can get my driver's license.

Lately it seems everybody's been offering me deals to behave. Like the vice principal arranging for me to take this one fast-track class if I promised to never again skip French class or forge another she-was-oh-so-sick note from my mother. My probation officer says I can just call in once a week now instead of having to walk way downtown on Mondays after school. All I have to do for him is "keep my nose clean."

The deals have a lot of plusses on my end, and few drawbacks that I can tell. Besides, for some time now I've been considering a path that runs a little closer to the straight and narrow, but I don't see that anyone really needs to know that.

* * *

"You're not actually planning to work upstairs looking like that?" Mrs. Martin asks me.

"I've just popped into her office to sign the book. Most of the time she never even looks up from her desk to see who it is.

"What?" I ask, as if I don't know what she means. I have my hair in a red bandanna. No socks and my uniform is filthy. So's the white t-shirt I have on, though she can't see the back where there's this picture of the Grateful Dead.

"I said you're not going in people's rooms dressed so . . . so . . . inappropriately." She puts her pencil down as if that's the end of it.

"But they're expecting me. I mean, well, I have things to do up there."

"We expect better from our girls." She pauses and looks at me as if I'm from another galaxy. "Are you even wearing a slip?"

"It was in the wash," I say.

"Martha, I want you to turn right around and go home. It sounds more like you need to do a little laundry today than to come in here to work. Throw that uniform in while you're at it."

I cross my name off the line where I've just written it down. I cross it off hard, almost ripping a hole in the page.

Walking out from her office and down the hall, I begin to think that I should at least go upstairs and let them know I can't work today.

Nurse Jacobs smiles when she sees me. "Martha, that guy in 232 wants a backrub. And he asked for you special."

"I can't stay," I say. "I'm inappropriately dressed."

She shakes her head. "I've got two aides out and one nurse who has to leave three hours early, and I really need you to help give some baths today. Lordy, Lordy. Let me think a minute."

Then she snaps her fingers and pulls open the big bottom drawer of her desk. She takes out a pair of white nurses' shoes. "My spare pair. Think these'll fit?"

I nod.

"OK, hurry up. Come on with me."

I follow her in to the back room where she opens a coat closet, shoves some hangers around, and pulls out a white smock.

"Let me see the pinafore," she says.

I unbutton it and hand it to her.

She looks at me standing there in my undies. "I guess you need a slip too." She turns the pinafore inside out. "Here, wear it backwards. This side's cleaner." She hands it to me, then pulls down her half slip from under her uniform and steps out of it. "And put this on."

When I get back down to Mrs. Martin's office, she's on the phone. "Yes, I understand you're short-handed," she's saying. "Maybe I can find another girl to send up there. We just can't have that sort of sloppiness --"

Her head pops up like it's on a spring when she sees me. "Well, yes, here she is now. All right, Nurse, it's your floor."

I write my name neatly in the book. Mrs. Martin just goes on reading some papers like she's so busy. "See ya later," I say.

I take the stairs back up and as soon as I open the stairwell door and step onto 2 West, I know something's wrong. Everyone's

moving too fast. A blue light is flashing over the Burns Room. At the desk Nurse Jacobs is saying over and over into the phone, "Code Blue--Room 288." When she sees me, she motions me over and hands me the phone. "Keep saying it," she says, "just keep it up."

I start. *Code Blue--Room 288.* It's like a chant. I hear people click on and off the line, but no voice ever speaks. Nurse Jacobs pulls a cart toward the room. I keep my voice at a slow steady pace, but my heart's way ahead at another. The hallway fills up with people in white coats.

I think of the girl's blue eyes, how pain had lightened and softened them. Last week I'd talked to her about a rock concert I'd seen on tv. At the end all the guys threw their guitars right out at the audience. All night there'd been this build-up of energy, I'd told her, and it had to go someplace. There was smoke and flames as the electricity short-circuited, but I didn't mention that. She'd squirmed a little on her pillows, making the water swirl up around her.

I keep repeating the room number. How long I don't know. The syllables settle into a beat I feel all the way to my toes. Then a doctor comes by and says I can hang up now. A line of white-coated strangers follows him to the elevator.

When Nurse Jacobs comes out of the room she just looks at me and says nothing.

Then Gloria comes over. "I suppose we should close all the doors," she says.

"Want me to?" I ask and hear the strangeness in my voice.

"Come back then when you're done, Martha. We'll wait for you." Nurse Jacobs lifts her hand a little.

The borrowed white shoes don't make a sound in the hallway. One by one I swing shut the doors, darkening the hallway.

I'm not sure why they're all waiting for me, but when I turn back at the end of the hall and see them all there by the desk, I know. I come up and stand with them.

Nurse Jacobs nods to the orderly who's been standing outside the door of the Burns Room. I feel a hand reach for my hand, and take it; then someone else takes my other hand. When the stretcher rolls out, we just stand like that and watch it go by. The doors of the elevator close, but we stand a while longer.

Then I'm sent to open the doors again, so we can go back to our work. I open the door on the slipped disc. I open the door on the pelvic fracture, the crushed knee. Light from their rooms pours back into the hallway. There are bed sores to sponge, elbows to cream and bottoms to powder. In my clean comfortable shoes, I move across the immaculate grey tiles and make not a sound in the world.

Nance Van Winckel

Islands

ONE

At midnight the woman who lived above him would dance. Lying in bed, he could hear her steps and he could hear her sing also. The songs were always soft, the dances too, her voice so delicate and her dancing so slow above him on the wood floor that it often made him think of spider webs or dream of cats that had lived in his neighborhood when he was a child in Wailuku, Hawaii.

It was always midnight when she began, at midnight after he returned from his night job, after he was settled and had eaten and had had a cup of tea or a glass of juice or maybe a beer. Then he would be in bed, not asleep, when her sounds would begin, start, and he was never angry about them, about her. And later, if he had not fallen asleep with her dancing and singing, he could hear her pour a bath, the water hushed-splashing, so wet and hot he imagined. And he also imagined her in the tub, a deep porcelain white tub, imagined a long young woman with red hair stretched in steaming water. And if he was still not asleep by then, he would think of the details of her long body, and though he has never met her or even seen her, he would think of her and those thoughts would arouse him and he would then stretch enjoyably like an animal stretches in sunlight after a nap. And then he could always sleep.

He only knew her name from the apartment mailbox, and not even her full name at that. A.B. Snow. That was all. A. B., her initials and her last name, Snow. And he thought of the word snow often, maybe because he was from Hawaii and there was no snow except over on the big island, on Mauna Kea's peak, and he thought of it usually while she sang or danced but also sometimes at work, thinking of it as he unloaded trucks at the warehouse outside of town, outside of Carson City.

He had come to Carson City because it was not Hawaii, had come to Nevada because it was long and dry. Even though there were mountains and snow in the winter, more important to him was that it grasped the wide desert. That was a good enough reason. That was enough.

When he first came, arrived without knowing anyone and never having been on the mainland before, he thought about becoming a cowboy of some sort or a professional gambler. But he realized, of course, that those were unrealistic thoughts and so he ended up in

Carson City, ended up working at a distribution warehouse out towards Dayton, out on Highway 50 where he knew that the blacktop kept stretching, continued on and out into the blank and beautiful Nevada desert.

Tonight he had worked hard, evenly, till the end of his shift. And when he got into his car to go home he just sat, sat and contemplated the highway and its eastern length. But eventually he started the car and drove home and he fell asleep by A.B. Snow's second song and he did not get to hear her pour water for a bath.

The next day he rose early, early because he liked the mornings. He used to work the graveyard shift and could never wake up till the afternoon, but now he could get up early while birds still sang and traffic started. He liked to be up with the morning paper and up to drink coffee when it tasted best and to have the new sunlight and no rain. Never any soft, clean rain here in Nevada. Just once in a while there was a torrent, which didn't even look like rain but more like a wet wall of grey, and it filled all the culverts and gulches and rushed along the streets of the city, stalling cars and trucks, or flash-flooded down the desert of the country, killing livestock and people. It wasn't really rain, just destruction. That was how it was.

And in the morning, thinking about rain made him think about home, about Hawaii, and it appeared there in his head as he drank his coffee and watched the street from his dusty window. It was there, the ruffled blue and of course the green, all of it, down to the black volcanic soil of his island. He saw it, dreamt of it, dreamt of walking along the coast where a fine mist sits forever in the air, along the rocks, and the lush slopes are behind him, all of that green and more green as he turns away from the coast and into the forest. In his mind he walks a slender path through banana-leaved bushes and makes his way to a house, a big house where in back there is a pool, a blue-bottomed swimming pool set in flat immaculate concrete as white as the sun. He is there alone, standing near the deep end, he disrobes there, surrounded by clean concrete and green he stands naked in front of the pool, the deep side, ready to dive... And then he quit. He thought of something else, of land and asphalt, so that all he saw now was the simple traffic of Carson City, Nevada out his window.

His mother called him on the telephone around noon. His mother now lived in Honolulu, close to his sister who worked as a model for travel posters, postcards, TV commercials and promotions. He didn't know what else his sister did.

"So, what you got going this weekend?" his mother asked after a while.

"I don't have any plans."

"I think it would do you some good to have some company... Maybe you should see a girl... Why, there's a friend of your sister's, this girl, she just moved to Toehoe. Or is it Tahoe? Anyway, she moved way out there and maybe she wants to meet you. Hmmm?"

He didn't say anything, he just imagined his mother's face at the receiver, waiting for him to speak. He saw her, saw her big orange lips moving like two thick slices of breadfruit, just waiting to flap and tell him about this woman.

"It would do you plenty good to meet this woman," his mother said. "You hear me? If you don't hear me, maybe you should come back home."

"I suppose I could... Saturday. Maybe Saturday."

"Good," she said, sounding happy, sounding close by even though she was out on the island. And he thought of her lips again, he remembered them, remembered when she used to kiss him with those lips.

"Aloha?"

"I'm here..."

"Okay, here's her name and number. I think she'd come to Carson City to see you..."

When he went to get his mail, her name was there: A.B. Snow. It was there on the little box for apartment 5, the box newer than the wall it was affixed to, newer than the wooden stairs and wooden floor that she walked on. And he forgot about his mail and thought about her singing, her steps, thought about bath water sloshing, and he looked out the apartment hallway window where it was another good dry hopeless day.

TWO

On Saturday she drove on down with the mountains behind her, drove down Highway 50 with all the green signs giving her the mileage to Carson City. She felt good to be getting out of Tahoe even though she hadn't lived there but two months. She shared a small condo with another woman - a blackjack dealer - a condo that was perched up on a heavy hill away from the lake, close to California. And she worked as a showgirl now, at Harrah's.

Harrah's was the best casino around, she knew that, but just the same it wasn't the kind of work, of career, that she had ever really envisioned herself doing.

In Hawaii she had seen photographs of him. Lana - his sister - had told her about him and she hoped that he was as nice as she said. She already knew that he was handsome, that he was Hawaiian. She's from Hawaii herself - Honolulu - but she's Japanese-Hawaiian. Just the same, she had worked as a model, she had been a dancer for nightclubs and hotel luaus, just like Lana. The tourists never knew the difference, never knew that she was Japanese. The native Hawaiians did, but that was okay, they were the same, they all went home to their four walls, just like her, home to their TVs and microwave dinners, they all hated the taste of poi.

She had wanted to be an actress - in the theatre - so she had left to pursue a degree in Drama at the University of Minnesota. That was why she had come to the mainland. Minnesota was why. But the program wasn't that good, or maybe she wasn't that good, and she really couldn't take Minnesota any longer, so she called her old agent and he sent her to Tahoe. And she thought that it would be like the stage, sort of, that it would be fun to be dancing again. But Tahoe was different. The dancing wasn't fun. She had thought that maybe it was a step, a step to Vegas or to Los Angeles, but she wasn't sure now. The people she worked for were kind of bad, kind of slimy, and if they were that way here what would they be like in Vegas or in L.A.?

She didn't know why she was in Tahoe, exactly.

Sometimes she would wake up at night, in the middle of the night in the darkness of her condo, and she couldn't remember where she was. She would draw a blank in her memory and she couldn't think of where she was or how she had gotten there - she knew who she was and did not panic - but she could not come up with the connections to her present life.

She slipped through the bald foothills, curving into shadows from the west, the highway holding pools of black and blue and all the big trees were behind her and Carson City was seventeen miles and she knew that the long dry-bed desert waited out beyond the city. She also knew that he was waiting for her, that even though they hadn't met it somehow seemed like they had. Maybe it was her imagination or maybe just her hopes, but it seemed like they had, it felt that way.

She had talked to Lana on the phone, told her about her doubts and frustrations and it was Lana who had suggested that she and her brother get together. And all in all it wouldn't be bad to have a

friend at least, even if it didn't work out on another level at least he could be her friend, someone who lived a normal life, had a normal job. But then maybe it would be more than just friendship. And she wondered what they would talk about tonight, she wondered if she would tell him about being on stage at Harrah's, about the floor show where she was as naked as anything with glitter glued on her small breasts, about how she played Polynesians or Chinese maidens and danced to music that pretended to be Asian, primitive.

And then she wondered why she hadn't stayed in school, why she came to Tahoe, came to dance naked in Nevada, how she came to consider a career in Hollywood. She wondered how that had happened.

In the outskirts of Carson City, along the strip, the streetlights suddenly flicked on and the solid signs of fastfood places and gas stations and stores were all lit with flat plastic reds, blues and yellows. She stopped at a red light and began to think of home, of Hawaii.

She thought of Honolulu, of the streets, her street, she dreamt of the beach away from Diamond Head, away from the hotels and towers and tourists. While waiting in the car she saw herself there, at home, on the porch of a house, she sits looking out to summer seas with blue rain clouds coming in and in, slowly advancing, trailing their blue veils. She sits and then stands and walks forward to meet them, meet the light blue swaths of rain and dark blue clouds over the calm and azure sea, she knows they are coming to scatter rainbows, to place chunks of prism light in the hills behind the city, colors so strong and bright she sees them as real and as solid as the city itself, and she walks down an alley past two dogs and a child and across a street to the beach and she lifts her skirt to enter the water, the soft waved water, to greet the clouds... and then she didn't. The light turned green and someone honked and she drove on, between the bone-colored buildings of Carson City.

THREE

She had to park along the street, about a block away, and walk to his apartment and he was asleep in the soft chair as her heels clicked on the pale sidewalk. He had fallen asleep while waiting for her and he was evening-dreaming about A.B. Snow, dreaming of her in that bathtub. He couldn't see her face in the dream - as

he had never seen her in real life - but she had long red hair and ripe breasts and slender all-white legs, he could see her in the tub from above as if he were an unseen angel on her bathroom ceiling, and he watched her as she slipped underwater, her head and hair and face all underwater in that big Nevada tub, he saw her there until the doorbell rang and his eyes opened.

"Come in, come in," he said and rubbed his eyes and felt a little embarrassed.

"Thank you."

"Do you... Would you like a glass of wine or a beer or something before we go out?"

"Okay, sure, some wine."

And she sat down into the chair that he had been sleeping in, dreaming in, and he went to close the door where she had entered. But before he closed it he looked down the hall, through the window, and saw that the stars were coming out in the desert sky.

After dinner and drinks downtown, they returned to his apartment and she felt good about the evening, about his shyness and his quiet questions. She felt good about him. They both drank red wine now, red wine that he poured into tumblers because he owned no wine glasses, and he had the lights on in the bathroom only, low lights so that it was almost orange in the livingroom, almost that color, where they sat together.

During dinner she had told him that she was thinking about going back to school. She did not say where or in what study and she didn't even know if that was true or not, about school. And now she asked him about his plans.

"I'm going to take the Civil Service exam," he said. "I can get a job with the State Government, I guess. They have an Affirmative Action program and need to hire minorities. That's what they told me, that they could use me. I guess I'm a minority."

And they both laughed a little and then were quiet.

"Don't you ever get homesick?" she asked. "Don't you miss the islands? Miss the water?"

He sat for a while in the orange darkness, with her next to him, thinking of home. He thought of home and of being alone in a place like Carson City, Nevada.

"I miss it," he answered. "But I had to leave, to get away. You know how it is, but I miss it."

And then she thought of Minnesota, of how it had been in St. Paul, how it had been on campus. She thought of blue winters wedged in faded light, of the flat landscapes and bare trees and

blocky buildings all caught in evening winter light.

"Don't you?" he wanted to know.

"Yes, I do," she said and she did. She missed Hawaii. Now that she had been away she could see that there was something fantastic, something about it that was with her, with her ever since she first left Honolulu, left over the expanse of Pacific.

"You know, the woman who lives above me dances," he told her.

They were both sitting quietly together, both of them thinking of home, of Hawaii, and then he said it. He wasn't sure why he told her - maybe because she was a dancer - but he wanted to tell her.

"I can hear her every night... I don't know if she's practicing or just does it... It's kind of nice to hear, living alone and all."

FOUR

"Listen," he says.

They are both on their backs, on top of the covers on the island of his bed in the bedroom with the lights off. And she smiles as the soft whisper sounds come from above, as she listens to wood-creaking rhythm. And he is there too, listening as he always listens, as if the sounds are drawn by gravity, down from the ceiling, down into his very skin. And then she feels touched as she hears the singing of A.B. Snow. They both smile. A.B. Snow sings low and feminine, hushed, so like a lullabye and neither of them know the lyrics. They are a little drunk but not embarrassed as they listen.

"And now she'll take a bath."

So they listen to the water, to the pouring and collecting of water above them and they are still on their backs in the blue blackness and water still spills as his hand goes out to her and she goes out to him.

They make love, he has her little olive body under him and under him, the quiet squeaking and her low sounds of pleasure, their paper voices like clear water in a tidal pool. And they send those sounds up, for A.B. Snow to hear, above, for her to regard in any way she pleases.

Craig Miles Miller

IF

Sister's eye works
just like a corkscrew.
She gets off the bus
with a big suitcase
full of brace-and-bit
questions.

Oh, she was sweet
when she wasn't curious.

Earth-auger Sister, the drill-bit
of the rig that dug the world's deepest oil well
gouged the earth with less precision and force
than you entered my fontenelle.

Not the surgeon who ran
a wire into my heart and watched it on a screen,
nor the surgeon who pulled out
my womb like the yolk of an egg through a pinhole,
nor he who held my liver in his hand
and seared it with fire,
probed me as you did.

He who will by autopsy find what you missed,
will be more gentle.

If I loved you, Sister,
I'd be afraid to tell it.

Naomi Clark

Becoming a Miser

Suddenly the world stops turning.
And every crack in the ground collapses
within itself. Tiny pieces of bark fall
from the trunks of trees, tumbling
upon each other at odd angles,
causing the birds overhead to circle
again, look out of one eye,
and fly toward something secure,
an old nesting place
or the sturdy branch above
the river, where the wind
is always from the east.

It is this way with so much.
My mother used to speak of an uncle
who wore only one pair of suspenders,
the same pair to work and to church,
who drove his sputtering truck
on empty, for miles,
to sell his dead wife's shoes.
And there was the lady down the block
who had keys for everything:
the garage, the cupboards,
the heavy drawers in her dresser.
In the end she couldn't escape
from her own house.
The smoke had crept up
from the basement and turned the locks
inside out
while she slept.

You, too, have seen it all happen,
the smallest things turning on themselves,
leaving you with your arms extended,
your eyes on the ground, looking
for a footprint, a single leaf,
a broken twig.
And finally you tuck your hands
in your pockets and move toward
the open field, searching
for the pile of rough stones
someone else has assembled
and forgotten.

James Langlas

What Might Have Been

Imagine that your grandfather as a young man
had sat in the diner for another ten minutes,
sipping a second cup of coffee, considering
his future one last time. Or that your mother
had never been infatuated with creases
and could have ignored the straight lines
and fresh smell of your father's shirt
before he sweated through it on the dance floor.
Or that no one had been allowed to wear blue jeans
to the dinner table.

Even the smallest details--a word, a passing look--
make a difference, causing us to wonder
how everything might have been.
Nothing in families is trivial.

I once saw my aunt break one
of her mother's china cups in the sink.
It fell without a care, making a single clicking sound.
My aunt is the type of woman who sleeps lightly,
who awakens if someone puts a key in the front door.
I know that if one tick of the clock travels
upstairs in the dark, she raises her sleeping hands
to her mouth again, looks above the chair
in the corner, and sees the white
of the sink and hears her mother's words,
sharp like slivers of glass.

For years, my aunt has carried
that one awkward moment with her.
Her movements have become carefully
planned, perfected, as though she had
written them down beforehand.
To this day, as her mother had done,
she charms the guests in the living room.
Alone in the kitchen, she stutters
to herself and wears gloves
to keep her fingers strong
and certain.

James Langlas

Alzheimer's

He'd like to say he didn't
slam the door and walk
the streets in anger,
that the dead leaves sounded
like something other
than dead leaves
scuttling over the asphalt,
that he stared
at the first snow
on the distant mountains
and pulled his collar
around his throat
and leaned into the wind
and forgot why
his fists were clenched.

But when he came home
she was still on the couch
with her knees pressed together
and her hands folded
in her lap. She turned
her eyes toward him,
and he hung his coat
and bent down
and began to collect
the stacks of photographs
he had thrown to the floor.
Again, he sat beside her
and tried to put back
pieces of her memory
one by one, but this time,
when she began to cry,
he took her small hands
in his own and knew
the idea had been impossible
and heard the sound
of the leaves scraping
against the porch
and a window shuddering

with the first breath
of winter, and he placed his lips
on her forehead and closed
his burning eyes.

Henry Gerfen

Communist

The locals said after the war he spent
twenty-five years in Franco's jails,
embittered, half-insane, dying
of hunger and contemplating revenge.
All of which made him a hero to me, an object
of my unwavering fascination as I watched him
sit, day after day, in the half-shade
of the same flickering leaves, studying
the monotonous rows of twisted olive trees
on the brown, dust choked Andalusian hills.
When he finally spoke to me, one night,
he was drunk in the local bodega. Leaning forward
on a three-legged stool, he pushed his breath
into my face. His voice had the texture
of gravel. Do you know what I wanted,
what I really wanted? he asked
with the single-mindedness of a man
discharging a burden he had carried
too many times up the same hill.
I wanted a woman. I wanted
to get laid, he said and laughed.
What did I expect? A fist
in the air? A band playing the International?
The word *liberty* on his lips?

Henry Gerfen

Marja Glaudi

Would wind her hair to a braided basket
back-of-her-neck; could
twist the neck of a goose in a second
and singe it and cook it quick-quick.

She had an amber hatpin
and a tarnished silver spoon
from the Old Country, Poland or Lithuania--
the border kept going back and forth
and she lost track,
but in 1967 on the green porch,
peeling and peeling the filmy silver dollar plant leaves
late afternoons,
the Russians,
she said,
were burning the farms. *Look!*
And pointed toward the picket fence
around the back garden. I looked.

Poppies, late roses; mossy bricks.
We kept telling her: *Don't worry.*
But she hid her butcher knife
in her deepest dresser drawer.

It wasn't a bad time, living there.
I loved my great-grandmother's silver hair
let down for drying: it streamed and glowed!
Tinsel! Willow fronds in rain--
"Delicious!" I cried out--*rozkoszny*--
combing and combing.

Old princess old doll old sorceress.
She was lovely and frightening like
the big framed Jesus with thorn-crowned heart
that sprouted a flame tuft
about the bed we slept in.

Amber rosary around her crooked hand
each night before the light went out,
she took my great-grandfather's wedding band
from the lacquered box
on the table next to the bed
and put it on her twisty thumb and pointed to his picture.
But I knew about the soldier she left in St. Petersburg
and never saw again.
He ripped off a button and put it in her hand.

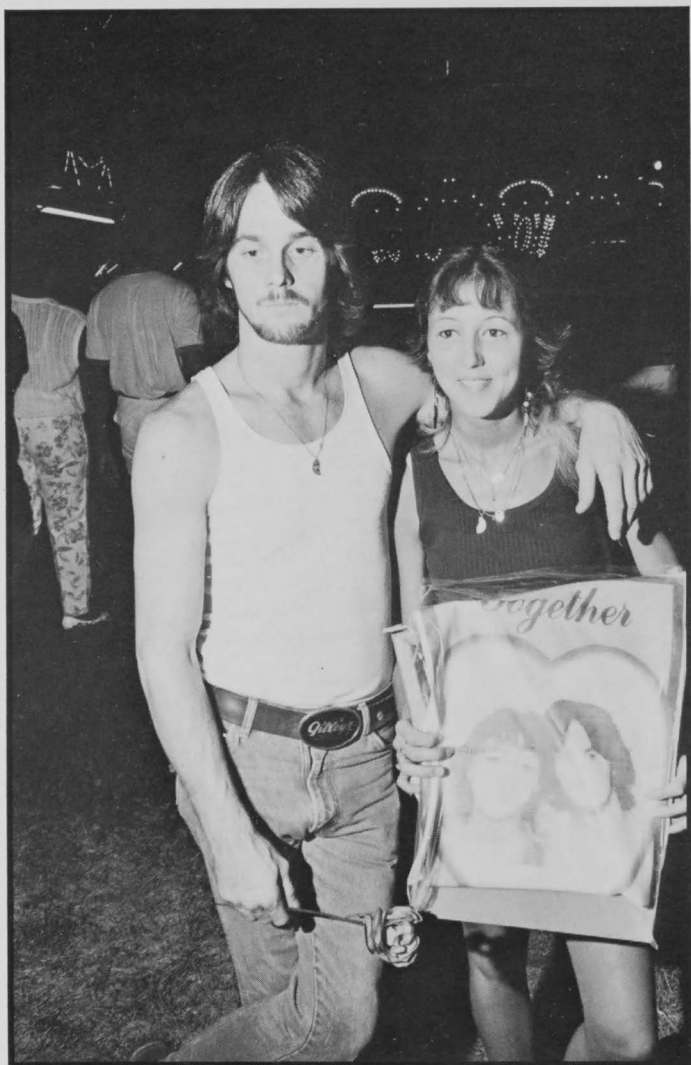
Snow made her cry.
And leaves burning.
He would tap his black boot in her dreams.
He would come through the window and wake her.
Once he played his sad fiddle by the poppies--

There were ninety-some years in her hands
when I unbent them.
The button rolled into a corner.
I kept listening for the soldier that night,
and my grandmother smoothed the pillow and said
Don't Worry
the same way we'd said it before
when it was only Lawrence Welk in a buzz of cable
and no Russians singing at all; when
it wasn't enough,
the sustenance of these gnawed-upon rosary beads
strung, indulgences and names of the dead,
amber dented in her hands.

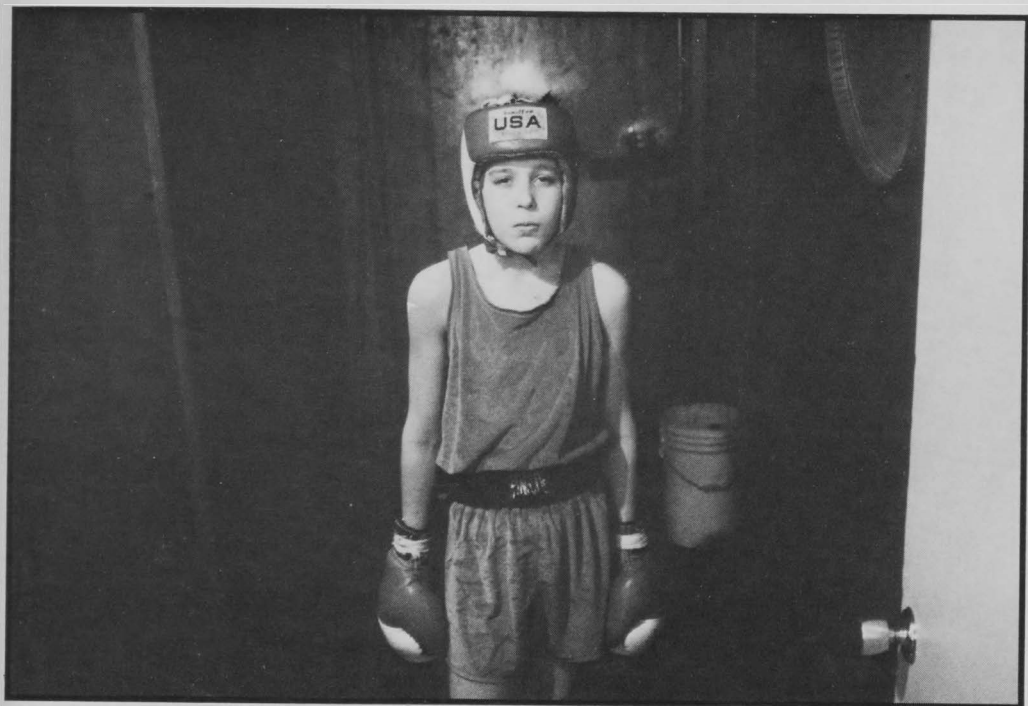
Karen Subach



Mother and Sons, 1987
photograph by Christopher Flinchpaugh



Young Couple, 1987
photograph by Christopher Flinchpaugh



Boxer, Hamilton, Montana, 1989
photograph by Christopher Flinchpaugh



The Valley of the Flowers, 1986
photograph by Christopher Flinchpaugh

To Maida of Yugoslavia *From My Book of Common Flowers:* *A Letter*

Dear Maida:

The tape I play before sleep, repeats
"tonight you will have a healing dream."
When I close my eyes I see green fields
lining the river of your home, the wild grasses,
dry flowers you boiled to clear my head of cold
that summer we met in Sisak. Just think of me
head bent over the steaming pot, white towel
draped down over seething brew, my red face,
to keep the healing in. There are no wild grasses,
flowers, to heal this wish to see you. By now,
mid-summer, you're knee-deep in the Serbo-
Croatian landscape that envelops your life
and closes you in.

No is the word I think of when your face appears
in my dreams, only because no is handed to you,
a sentence I can't fathom. Your husband
and his keys that won't let you out
of the kitchen to hear a choir
practice in the park. Instead, you practice
the lines you would say had you no children,
the hard line you would walk, back
only slightly bent against the cold stares
of tradition, communism, catholicism
that won't let a woman walk
away from a man or the vicious love
of your son and daughter that won't let you
go. Oh Maida, what might you be thinking now,
brushing hard crumbs from the table.

You say "some such something" when you don't know the words
to speak your thoughts in English. I say odd things
when no words come. Bogbean, buckbean. Now I know the name
of your remedy, your healing, no matter the language
it grows in. I've been reading of Leonurus,
Motherwort, which stimulates the heart.
There is no better herb to take
the melancholy vapors, says my book

of common flowers. Leonurus,
it settles the womb and makes mothers
joyful. Or get this. St. Johnswort.
It cures madness. Anyone treading it after dark
will be wheeled through the heavens all night
on the back of a magical horse. My love to you Maida.
Denise.

Denise Williams

Carrion

My father's thoughts are crows beating a blue
black sky. A sky of soft wind and water, breaking
like low thunder. My father's hands tremble as he loads
shells in the basement. He speaks of the sweet kill.
He speaks this indirectly, with words like Deer Mountain,
buck mount, and return--ringing with the echo.

of rifle fire. My father hands over his life to the hills,
coming softly through trees, shifting the hard dirt.
The brass in his hands is sleek
and he rubs the bullet with his thumb. With stone
aim, my father fires. Explosives ring, gun smoke
trailing the distance. He bends to see the precision

of his craft--a clean kill. Tough
scavenger crows float in the circular sky,
their brass eyes riveted on the carcass that drains
in slow rivers that run through the green iris
of my father's eyes.

Denise Williams

Laura

I am Laura, Alicia, Marianna, Elena, Cecile.
I am all the beautiful names of women.
Curled up in the dark bus, my smell
goes only a small way; I hold it to me
for safety. My hair whispers the curve
of my names, repeats them in Niles of light
and shadow. My eyes turn the neon outside
of Boise into a parade of wishes. Who could resist
this life? God, how I hate the fear in men,
the closet of their names, the hard march
of syllables, unable at the end to open
to anything: Eric, Bill, John, Sam and Eric
again who left me with this child inside.
Eric, even this huddled rolling back
to my mother is stronger than you.
Why must I be a prisoner to my strength?
I could have any of you, watch a million backs
in my mirror, slip my fingers over deltas
of muscle, through the acrid scents
of riverbanks and hollows until my finger-tips
were liquid. My touch could carry sighs big
as trees or boats. I'd pour through workshirts
and jeans, sing myself through sweat
until I rubbed round even years. I'd water
my names until they grew their wishes
through the bones of armies and greeted birds
through the hard thin shells of their birth.

David Braden

CutBank Reviews

The Tongues We Speak, New and Selected Poems

by Patricia Goedicke

Milkweed Editions, 1989

Patricia Goedicke's *The Tongues We Speak, New and Selected Poems*, presents the major work of a poet who continues to find a profound generosity and resilience within the temporal, oftentimes elusive, nature of the world. "No bigger than a moth's shadow/With soft shaky wings," she tells us, "Something in us/Persists:..." ("Crossing the Same River"). In all her varieties of probing the mystery of lived experience, Goedicke moves constantly toward a sense of continuity in change, one of her principles of faith. Sometimes she finds jubilation, as in the image at the end of the same poem: "The sweet, steadfast cells of love/Forever replacing each other/and ringing."

This faith in the world walks side by side with loss, always managing to transform it in images extensive in both range and complexity of vision:

In the shadowless country of loss
Wafers of silence whirr,
Knives like hummingbirds flicker.
("That Was the Fruit of My Orchard")

I see him standing like an orchard
Over all the dry days of her dying
("My Mother's/My/Death/Birthday")

Without being didactic, Goedicke's images gradually develop into a body of knowledge as important to us as it is to her. We learn from her poems universal truths grown from a sense of selfhood that has effaced self-centeredness. The poems embrace a wide landscape of compassion fashioned out of vulnerability, pain, loss, and loneliness; and the result of these encounters is uncompromising honesty:

Suddenly you remember:
The beloved does not come
From nowhere: out of himself, alone

Often he comes slowly, carefully
After a long taxi ride
Past many beautiful men and women

And many dead bodies,
Mysterious and important companions.
("The Arrival")

The beloved is not only the other, but also the self, as suggested in the "Mysterious and important companions." The word "important" carries a ring of necessity: one does not arrive at truth only through consideration of the other's experience, but through shared experience.

Rarely in Goedicke's poems do we feel merely spoken to: so many of the poems convey a sense of reader as speaker, as in "The Arrival." "Daily the Ocean Between Us" comes to a similar closure:

Each of us embraces the other
With fists or kisses, no matter;

Whenever you shift, I shift
From one stroke to the other,

Daily the ocean between us
Grows deeper but not wider.

Goedicke is foremost among our contemporaries in closing the distance between speaker and reader. While maintaining integrity, "the tongues we speak" are more common than they are particular; and, for me, her strongest poems are those that create this bond. No matter the circumstance or concern, I never feel myself a stranger walking through the given landscapes of these poems. The distinctions between male/female, human/nonhuman, child/adult, dissolve in the mystery underlying everything:

Whatever life we cultivate
Out of the animal moans of childhood

It is all wheat fields, all grass
Growing and being grown.
("The Tongues We Speak")

This connectedness within the world and expansive vision inhabit the six new poems of the collection in which Goedicke's language is full and fluid, turning immediately into music whenever the imagination passes through the interplay of light and shadow. She demonstrates in these poems what distinguishes her earlier work, often giving over what she knows and feels like a pianist lingering over the last notes of a measure before finally moving into the next. Or like a fine jazz or blues singer coming in just before or after the anticipated note:

I will be looking for it always

Wherever it is, next to me
In the darkness

Of rumpled white sheets,
Pale siftings, clouds

Sudden scarves of ourselves gusting
Loose, sandpapery as snow lifting

In what chill citadel of ice crystals
Will I find you?

("The Hills in Half Light")

Remarkable language flares up over and over again, her lines spilling into wonderful turns of phrasing and patterns of sound, testifying to the unity of form and content that identifies Goedicke as one of our finest poets working today:

Though the windows still keep watch, crisscrossed
By crows passing, the abrupt hunch of a hawk

In sparse grass small rodents scatter
From desert to schoolyard to space center

Wherever we are, in city traffic speeding,
Huddled behind blind skyscrapers,

Grandchildren of Detroit's red ore,
Of Chicago's nuclear reactors

Scraped together but still clinging
At the end of the century like barnacles

Faceless as cliffs we keep listening

For something, what is it, some knock
At the door....

("Who Goes There")

In the penetrating music and imagery of this last poem, Goedicke reasserts her faith in the world and in our capacity to embrace its dark mystery. Like "some knock at the door," her poems continue to make us want to act, to get up and see what's there.

Lorraine Ferra

The Year of the Zinc Penny by Rick DeMarinis W.W. Norton, 1989

Anyone familiar with the earlier fiction of Rick DeMarinis will come to *The Year of the Zinc Penny* with high expectations. Happily, he will not be disappointed in the least. In fact, he's likely to be lifted to such heights of pleasure in what DeMarinis does with the novel form and in particular with the subject he has chosen as to go away grumbling from the myriad lesser fictions that attempt similar things and do not even touch his skill.

The year is 1942/3 when zinc pennies replaced pure copper because World War II made copper, along with many other products, a precious commodity to be shunted to the war effort. Trygve Napoli is a 10-year-old, who will turn 11 in this crucial year. He's of mixed Norwegian/Italian heritage and only wishes that he had a completely neutral, wholly American name like Charles Jones, Bill Tucker or Bob Smith, so he wouldn't excite the attention of anyone in any setting in which he finds himself. He has just spent four years with his unlovely, uncommunicative Norwegian grandparents in Montana, abandoned by his mother, who then sends for him to join her and his new step-father in Los Angeles. But disaster strikes again when he's put in a foster home because of the adults getting into trouble with the law. He suffers a sense of displacement and fear of further displacement and

abandonment, but finally the family, full of odd lots as it is, gathers in a crowded apartment. The group includes his mother, Aunt Ginger, her husband when he's on shore leave, his older cousin, a Canadian who will turn 16 during the year and aspires to join the Marines and Mitchell, his draft-avoiding milkman step-father, who aspires to leading-man roles in Hollywood.

The story of this momentous year is told entirely through Tryg's eyes, ears, a mind and feelings. He is both an astonishing young boy and a very ordinary one—ordinary in the sense of partaking of all the events current in L.A. at the time and responding pretty much as any 10-year-old boy might, but always with the difference of having a sensibility that goes beyond the expected to question life and death, develop ticks and fevers and nosebleeds in response to the terrible uncertainties of his life, mirrored by the uncertainties of the war and the people he actually knows who are at risk because of it. DeMarinis captures perfectly the ambiance of Los Angeles in that era: zoot-suit wars, upheavals in family life, bigotry in restrictive renting, the way classrooms were conducted, the rootlessness of a highly transient population and the fears of plane-spotting, coast-watching and monitoring of shortwave radio sets to pick up war news and encoded signals around the world. Living in L.A. as they do, movies are a primary entertainment, along with popular radio shows, and Trygve's imagination is both inflamed and disturbed by vampire and war movies.

Everything in this book is perfectly paced and perfectly written. Details are accurate and in the language and character of this highly individual and intriguing young boy. There is nothing sentimental, though there is much sentiment. People's feelings run high and Tryg is privy to scenes of drinking, violence, bigotry, fear, sex and tenderness. At the end of this eventful year, when he's once again on his way back to Montana, his family having been evicted from their apartment and once again fragmented by circumstance, he travels by train alone and goes to the bathroom to sit on a closed lid and smoke.

On the wall opposite me, someone had drawn
a shaky Kilroy. The little beady eyes stared
at me. The little hands gripped the wall
for dear life.

What an ending, absolutely true to everything that went before. And what a way to leave us, holding on for dear life for him, but exactly right, too.

Laurel Speer

6 *Tanyin Alley*

by Liu Zongren

China Books & Periodicals, 1989

Here in vacant lots children find mutilated bodies and abandoned infants. Yet, they don't run to tell an adult, they ignore them as commonplace. This is Beijing, China, from 1949 to the 1980's. And in this view of China readers may grow to imagine that the world of George Orwell's *1984* was indeed a reality.

6 Tanyin Alley is for the most part the story of one courtyard in Beijing, and the 11 families who live in it, as seen through the eyes of the main character, Longsen. During a long period of political upheaval, Zongren takes us into homes where only paper windows and underfed stoves keep the winter cold out.

Lives in the alley are intertwined and are caught up in the cultural revolution. Gossip, the central recreational activity of the courtyard (and the reason China needs no KGB), brings the people of the alley together and then, maddeningly, drives them to isolation when saying the wrong thing to the wrong person, or having the wrong friends, begins to be the means that can send you to prison or worse.

Longsen is an intelligent man who hides his often persecuted gift of intelligence from his working class neighbors. He's careful at the Bureau where he works to be quiet, make no enemies. But various factions of the Red Guards are loose, beating people to death on the spot for things as simple as having wealth; or having had wealth; having been picked out as a "capitalist roader" by the neighborhood committee for making two yuan more than they a month; having been in the army 14 years before; or simply belonging to the wrong faction of the Red Guards. Longsen's friends, the people he grew up with, lives with, and depends on for companionship, belong to one Red Guard faction. Longsen is an innocent who tries to avoid trouble by never becoming an actual member of their group, never participating in any of their activities. But all that care proves useless when the new political group comes in and begins to arrest his friends for crimes that may or may not have been committed. They soon accuse Longsen of being the group's mastermind.

The novel gives the reader a sense of the chaos of Chinese communistic history. The reader experiences that what has replaced the old system in China is a system where those few in power control everything. And the poor, with no chance of attaining power, suffer at the hands of those struggling for some middle ground of power.

Technical problems do abound in the novel. Longsen tells his tale in English with the stylistic skill of a proficient American high school graduate. The novel is unbalanced on a personal level. In the opening of the novel we see how, in this very different culture, Longsen wooed Shalin, his wife to be. But after experiencing this courtship, the relationship between the two is hardly touched on. Instead, Longsen dwells on his relationship with his friends, the people in the courtyard and the people at the Bureau, laying the groundwork for his political problems. Well into the novel we get hints that Longsen and Shalin's marriage is not happy. It is almost as if Zongren is not afraid to attack China's politics but will not break some cultural rule that forbids him to talk about what goes on between a man and his wife. When Shalin, much later in the book, causes Longsen to be sent to prison due to her political blindness, we wonder how two people could be together for so long and not put together a mutual plan for survival in such dangerous times. In prison Longsen tells Shalin not to visit because the trip is too long. He then spends three years without her. When Longsen gets out of prison, he goes back to Shalin, leaving the reader to wonder why.

Aside from the story of how Longsen met Shalin, much of the novel does not hang together as a "story." It abounds in episodic vignettes on what happened at the Bureau, what happened to the neighbors, strung together like bits of gossip. But Zongren does paint a brilliant portrait of a culture so different from ours that it will keep you turning the pages. And at times, despite his simplistic prose, he manages many insights into that culture that are positively inspired.

David Curran

Coyote in the Mountains and Other Stories

by John Rember

Limberlost Press, 1989, Rick and Rosemary
Ardinger, Eds.

If you had asked me if it was possible to write fables of modern American society using, as your central character, an animal whose tales were already specific to another culture, I would have said you were nuts. Why strap yourself like that?

And to the coyote? On the one hand the Native American tales are so good. On the other, Hollywood's taken the character. What do you need it for? It's been done.

But not like John Rember has done it in this lovely book, *Coyote in the Mountains*, Limberlost Press, 1989. The stories are magic, doing all the things fables are called on to do: illustrating human foibles, explaining how things got that way and warning us that if things keep happening as they are, they could get worse. But Coyote stories are also fables about a specific animal character, the trickster, the one who's always using his brain for advantage.

"A Few Beers and a Road Trip," introduces this character to us in a new guise. Restless from a long winter, Coyote is cleaning his car for a ride he feels he must take.

It was not a small task. He had avoided it until a series of warm spring days had melted the pad of ice which built up on the floorboard during the winter. Things frozen there had escaped. A rich malignant smell hung about the vehicle, a smell compounded of spilled beer, hamburger wrappers, and the disintegrating contents of doggie bags.

His friend, Badger, comes by and asks to go along. But Badger gets drunk and belligerent which is his nature and they are stopped by the police for throwing beer bottles at road signs. Coyote explains that Badger is a Vietnam vet and they are let go. Soon Coyote turns around and, on the way back, he begins to drink and throw beer bottles out the window.

In a plot summary it doesn't sound like much. But the plot is important. All through the story Coyote has been annoyed at Badger for acting like a jerk and ruining a trip that's supposed to chase away the winter blues. But, in the end, acting like Badger turns out to be exactly what is needed to chase the blues. Coyote wouldn't have known this if Badger had not come along to show him how and, with the vet excuse, given him the safety to do it. Badger makes the kill, eats his fill and Coyote finishes up.

It's the symbiotic relationship of one animal to another and of one human being to another, and it's a theme that runs through fables of all cultures. Another theme in "A Few Beers and a Road Trip" is that of the kill. Each story contains a victory, a kill, or a loss of that kill. It's a victory or loss that Coyote, the scavenger, partakes of, and, through Coyote, the reader, too. In "The Bright Beauty of the World," these themes come up again.

Coyote falls for Lynx, a beautiful barmaid who tells him she's restless in her marriage and job and wants to get away.

"Restless," said Lynx. "Sometimes when I drive home after we've closed I just want to keep on driving. It doesn't matter where. Just the sound of the wind and the white lines disappearing under the hood and being alone--that's enough."

Later, drunk, Coyote asks her what she means by restless? He feels it too and wants her to go with him but she's too tired. Yet he cannot let go of what she has suggested and so runs away without her. When he finally stops for gas several hundred miles later, he's caught by the beautiful sunrise and calls to tell her about it. But she is only annoyed at being awakened.

It's a lot like the story of Badger. Coyote profits from a friend's kill. But this time the friend has killed for sport. Lynx will not eat and Coyote not only gets it all to himself but also learns that they are, after all, two very different animals with very different diets.

There are other stories about differences between animals. "Object Lesson" is the story of Otter, the romantic waitress, and her affair with Sandhill Crane, a married school teacher. Coyote goes into a cafe for breakfast and Otter tells him she and Sandhill Crane are going to Alaska. Coyote is offended for he knows Sandhill Crane's wife and children and scolds Otter. Just then Sandhill Crane comes in and tells Coyote how happy he is and how beautiful his future with Otter will be. But when he and Coyote are alone, he confesses that he's also doing it because he's afraid of growing old. He leaves and Coyote asks Otter when they are going? She surprises him by saying never. She has just realized it's over.

In "Object Lesson" Coyote seems to be a third party, the voice of reality. And all he seems to get out of the story is the realization that he must cut firewood for the coming winter. But Otter, perhaps because of Coyote's scolding, realizes that what she wants is what she has. Romance has been her kill and she's already eaten. She knows if she runs off with Sandhill Crane, she'll eat no more. They're not for each other. They are very different animals with very different eating habits. But Coyote understands her and the reader realizes by the end that it is they who are alike.

Perhaps the least successful story in the book is another Coyote-as-observer story. In "User Friendly," the tale of Loon, Coyote's insane friend who's turned himself into a computer, we

lose the character of Coyote. I think the original idea might have been to see Loon as already dead. Because coyotes are scavengers, Coyote would eat of his old friend who would turn out to be poisoned meat. But Coyote never eats and the story ends with a forced sentiment about loss.

But "User Friendly" is the exception that proves just how good the other stories in *Coyote in the Mountains* are. And it's the one that first got me thinking about why the book worked so well. How did John Rember do it? How, in this age when fables are considered an archaic folk art, good only for the broadest satire, did he have me eating out of his hand as if I were some kind of happy-go-lucky scavenger. My only criticism is that the book is too short. Writing as delicious as this makes gluttons of us all.

Earl Ganz

Contributors Notes

Poetry

ZAN BOCKES was born in Nürnberg, Germany. She has published poetry in several literary magazines. Look for her fiction in the next issue of *CutBank*. DAVID BRADEN is a poet and a playwright and a fisherman. He spends his summers on the river and his winters remembering the river. He is working toward his MFA in Creative Writing at the University of Montana. NAOMI CLARK is a widely published author from Port Townsend, Washington. Her second book of poems, *When I Kept Silence*, was recently published by Cleveland State University Press. JOHN DECEMBER earned his MFA in Creative Writing from Wichita State University. He is currently working on a graduate degree in Computer Science. He has published poems recently in *Poem* and *Poet Lore*. TODD FREDERICKSON is in the Peace Corps, teaching English at Sana's University in Sana'a, Yemen. He has poems forthcoming in *Prairie Schooner*, *South Dakota Review*, and *Great River Review*. HENRY GERFEN'S poem "Final Season" was included in *New Voices*, a 1989 anthology of prize-winning poetry published by the Academy of American Poets. He earned his B.A. from Dartmouth, and plans to pursue a Ph.D. in Linguistics. LOWELL JAEGER is a graduate of the Iowa Writer's Workshop, and a 1986 recipient of a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts. His first book, *War on War*, is in its second printing, and his second book, *Hope Against Hope*, is forthcoming this spring from the Utah State University Press. In the spring of 1990, JIM LANGLAS will be featured "Illinois Poet" in *Spring River Quarterly*. He also has work forthcoming in *Cottonwood*, *Swamproot*, and *Sou'wester*. WALTER McDONALD is the director of the Creative Writing program at Texas Tech University, and the author of four books of poetry. His latest book is *Night Landings* (Harper & Row, 1989). SHERYL NOETHE lives on the highway between Missoula and Salmon, Idaho, in an old yellow Chrysler. Her greatest joy in life is talking fourth graders into becoming poets. Teachers & Writers Collaborative actually pays her to do it. PEGGY SHUMACHER teaches in the Creative Writing program at the University of Alaska, Fairbanks. She was awarded a National Endowment for the Arts fellowship in 1989, and is the author of two books of poetry. Her latest book is *The Circle of Totems* (Pitt, 1988). KAREN SUBACH has published in *The Iowa Journal of Literary Studies*, *Without Halos*, and *The Cimarron Review*. She has work forthcoming in *The American Poetry Review*. MARTH WICKELHAUS lives in Emporia, Kansas and has published in *Quarterly West*, *Carolina Quarterly*, and other literary magazines. DENISE WILLIAMS teaches writing at Penn State University. She takes great pride in hailing from "a bizarre little mining town" that borders Death Valley, California.

Fiction

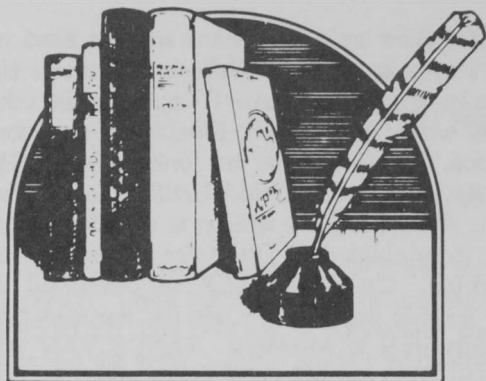
ROBIN BEEMAN grew up in Louisiana and has lived in Mexico and California. She's now at the Iowa Writer's Workshop. Her stories have appeared in *Fiction Network*, *Ascent*, *Crazyhorse* and other magazines. PHIL CONDON writes in Missoula, Montana. Other stories from his ongoing collection, *Vex & Silence*, are forthcoming in *Shenandoah* and *The Black Warrior Review*. RICK DeMARINIS, whose latest novel is *The Year of the Zinc Penny*, teaches writing at the University of Texas, El Paso. His short story collection, *The Voice of America*, is forthcoming from W. W. Norton. CRAIG MILLER has completed one novel and hopes to finish another this summer. He has attended the University of Iowa and currently lives in Missoula. NANCE VAN WINCKEL, who directs the writing program at Lake Forest College in Illinois, recently had her first collection of poems, *Bad Girl, with Hawk*, published by the University of Illinois Press. Her fiction has appeared in *The Northwest Review*.

Artists & Photographers

CHRISTOPHER FLINCHPAUGH was born in St. Louis, Missouri in 1962, during the same week the Cuban Missile Crisis filled the churches. Of his photography, he writes, "I photograph people and things to understand them. I understand the people and things aren't what they pretend to be--that compromise and paradox and unintended irony underlie most public displays." He currently works at a nursery in Missoula and plans to enter an MFA program in Photography at the University of Illinois at Chicago in the fall. BEV BECK GLUECHERT completed her MFA in printmaking last June at UM. She has worked in the human services field for seven years and says that her recent work "reflects human dynamics and inter-relationships that are difficult and often traumatic." STEVE SAROFF, whose work appears on the cover of this issue, lives in Missoula where he works as a computer consultant. His photography has appeared in several newspapers and his fiction has been published in small magazines and twice in *Redbook*. He is a former staff member of *Cutbank*.

Book Reviewers

DAVID CURRAN is editor of *CutBank*. Most recently, with David Braden, he co-authored a story for the TV series *Wiseguy*. The show "People Do It All the Time," aired November 8, 1989. LORRAINE FERRA lives in Port Townsend, Washington. She has published poetry in the *Westigan Review* and *The Florida Review* and has work forthcoming in the *Seattle Review*. She is a "Poet in the Schools" in Washington, Utah, and Delaware. EARL GANZ was born in Brooklyn and came to Montana in 1966 to direct the University of Montana's writing program. A graduate of the Iowa Writer's Workshop, his first collection of short stories, *Animal Care*, will appear in April of this year. He is currently working on a novel called *The Jewish Wars*. LAUREL SPEER writes a column and reviews books in *Small Press Review*. Her address is P.O. Box 12220, Tucson, AZ 85732-2220.



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My Father Teaches Me to Fly

I am old enough to know it is not possible,
but the wind rushing in from the lake lifts
my hair, brushes my face like a wing.
I feel like I could fly, I say.
He grins. Anything is possible, he says.

He says, it's windy enough to fly across
the lake. He drapes a towel
over my bare shoulders, tells me
to flap it like this, and he spreads
his great arms out like an eagle,
his fingers extended like the wingtips
of hawks.

I know if I run
fast enough down the dock,
I can fly out
to the mooring post.
His eyes believe in me.
I suck in air, flap
my wings, and know
that I can fly.

From the beach to the end of the dock,
it's a 40-foot runway.
My father gives me the starting sign
and I tear down the dock, straight
into the full wind.

I feel my legs pumping,
the wind snapping
my terry cloth wings,
see the grey lake
ahead, and I'm off the end,
flapping,
struggling,
willing the wind
to pick me up,
and I think maybe
I fly a few feet,
but the cold lake crashes in my ears.

When I come up, my father stands on shore,
shaking his head, and the towel
weighs me down.
He says only one thing:
You didn't try hard enough.

Zan Bockes